

Virginia Rose

The background of the entire cover is a warm, golden sunset over a field. In the center, two hands are shown: one from the left, palm up, holding a single red rose, and another from the right, holding the stem of the same rose. The rose is vibrant red with green leaves and a stem. The overall mood is romantic and nostalgic.

The Virginia Rose
Everybody knows,
Always Lasts Forever

J Bennington

The Virginia Rose

By J. Bennington

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Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER ONE

June 30, 1772

A merciless sun beats down through a cloudless sky, scorching the earth and threatening to turn it into powder. The same threat was applied to the man who lay face down beside the road. The shade of the trees was of little help against the rays that burned through the parched leaves and attacked him in many spots. He had lain in the dust for hours, hoping the lack of movement would spare him a heat stroke. Although he occasionally dozed from boredom, he thought more frequently than rested.

Of one thing he was sure, the one fact in his life was the secret that the whole world realized and shared; Bower's Point, in the Province of Delaware, was the last stop on earth. The dying seaport was empty of life; it was the catchall for the hopeless, the washed-up, the low-life people. Bower's Point was the handbasket filled with rejects resigned to descend into hell. Those who came, stayed, suffered, and died there. There was no way out and no hope for the ones trapped in Bower's Point.

He felt a nudge and lazily opened one eye. He saw a set of toes covered with dust and dried mud. He opened the eye wider and saw a small ankle that disappeared into the folds of a brown skirt. It intrigued him enough to move his head and open both eyes. The skirt faded from age and wear but was clean, ended at the woman's waist, and was topped by a once white, but now faded yellowish blouse, partially covered with a light brown cloak.

The woman's tanned face had a weathered look as if she was the spouse of a farmer. Her cheeks were dimpled and soft. Her nose was small and slightly tucked under at the tip. Her hazel brown eyes looked at him with concern. Her jet-black hair surrounding her face fell straight and tangled now, but he could see the past effects of curling above the ears and at the nape of her neck. A faded yellow scarf was tied loosely around her head.

"Are you dying?" she asked when he had looked at her for a moment.

"No, I'm not dead yet." He moved a little, shifted his body, yawned, and stretched his muscles. "I may look dead, but I was just trying to stay calm and hoping the sun wouldn't bake me before it sets."

"Pity," she said. "I hoped to claim your coat to keep me warm this coming winter."

"That wasn't very nice, Miss," he frowned.

A tiny smile fluttered across her face. "Since you've known me, have I ever claimed to be nice?"

"Who are you?" he asked, still frowning. "Where did you come from? I haven't seen you here before."

"I'm Virginia Rose," she said, bowing her head slightly. "I came here from Philadelphia. It's taken me a while to get here. In fact, I just arrived. That's why you haven't seen me. Were you looking for me?"

He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck with a parched, wrinkled hand. "Why the bloody hell would I be looking for you?" he growled and stretched again.

"Pity. It's been like that my whole life. No one has ever looked for me, but they ask about me. Who's that? Virginia Rose, who? Never heard of her. Where did she come from? Wish she'd go back."

"Well, I wasn't looking for Virginia Rose, I'm sorry to say. But you look like you were a fine young woman once."

She raised her brows and delivered a snappy response. "I beg your pardon. You told me I wasn't very nice, wishing to keep warm this winter. Now, look at you. You've become intimate with me, and you insulted my looks. You have a lot of nerve, sir!"

His frown deepened. "I've not become intimate with you! I haven't touched you at all!"

"Pity. "That's in line with no one looking for me. It's depressing, you know. I mean, you know my name and where I'm from. Then you tell me I'm old and no longer pretty. It would be best if you looked at yourself. I think you are older than dirt, and I'll bet you your coat that I'm younger than you."

She sat beside him. "Well?"

He suddenly laughed at her expression. "I'm sorry. I really didn't mean it as an insult. I meant I should have been looking for you many years ago when you were. . . So maybe I'd better think of something else to say."

She laughed and threw her head back. "Well, since you know me, would it be possible for me to know you?"

"That's fair enough. I'm Captain Merriweather, ex-captain of the tall ship The Willow. I'm originally from London, England. Now I sit here at this last stop before hell and wait for the end of my life. If you wish to live and be a part of the world, Virginia, my advice is to move on. Move anywhere except to Bower's Point."

She smiled. "Thanks, Captain. Do people call you that?"

He nodded. "Most do. My first name is Nathan."

"I'll call you that then." She crossed her legs and spread out her skirt.

"I'm hungry. Can you feed me?"

"Are you crazy? I have a bloody hard enough time just keeping myself alive."

"No, I'm not crazy. I asked if you could feed me. I take your answer to mean no since you are a hard man. You should be glad I'm not your mother. I'd take a switch to you if you were my son. I'd not be sparing the rod on such an unruly person."

"I'm bloody happy I'm not your son! What is the point of this? Why didn't you keep going? Why did you stop to bother my sleep?"

"Why were you sleeping anyway?" she asked. Inwardly she enjoyed the distress her presence created. She admired his self-control.

"Because there's no work today. The nets have all gone out on the boats, and I went for a walk. If I bloody want to sleep, I will, whether you like it or not!"

She reached into her skirt pocket, took out two apples, and handed one to him. "It never hurts to ask, sir. I wouldn't have known your name if I hadn't asked you. You learn by asking and listening to what's said. But I do hope you won't be this way forever. You will only make life more difficult for yourself."

He looked at the apple and then at her. He thought to himself, "This is strange. What's she looking for? She can't be interested in me. She looks like she comes from a wealthy family. Watch yourself and your pockets, Nathan. She'll knock you on the head when you're not looking. Then, when you wake, your coat, pants, and money will be gone."

"I know I could have walked on," she said. "I also could have taken a rock and done you in. Then I would have your coat, shirt, pants, and shoes. However, that isn't me."

She took a bite from her apple and chewed slowly. "I married when I was thirteen, and my mama said it was high time for me. I've lived alone for many years since my husband decided he had to go west and seek his fortune. Instead, he found his death and a grave somewhere there. As you said, I'm not the young woman I was when I was seventeen. Right now, I'm twenty and

worried about the future and what will happen to me. I'm lonely, but I'm not the kind of woman who can hang out in taverns and earn money that way. That isn't a life; that's a living death.

"Five years I've been alone. I've wandered from Philadelphia to here. Why did I stop to talk to you? I don't know. You didn't seem to be an unkind person, lying there sleeping. I still think you're nice even though you try to be as mean as a baited bear now that I woke you up. So, don't pretend to be bitter with me or life."

"Agreed, but you still haven't answered my question. Why did you choose me?"

"I don't really know. I just decided to stop. I have no reason. I'm a hard woman, and you must be to live in this world. If I were a little fluff, like some women, I'd probably be dead by now, trying to live on my own. It's not easy. However, now that you're awake and alive, I find that I like you. I hope you like me a little. Do you?"

He nodded and started eating his apple while thoughts swam around his mind.

"If I read this right, this woman has appeared from nowhere, looking for a husband or wants to live with a man. I'm not rich. I'm so poor; I can't afford to die right now. How could she live that way? She's tough, but not that tough. You do have some luck, though. You're a man scared of what you love most, and now this beautiful woman sits beside you, and you could have her. You're scared of her too. And look at you, can't even take care of yourself."

"Why is a Captain lying on the ground, letting the sun bake him? Why aren't you on a ship, bouncing around on the waves, fishing, and such?"

He sighed as if it were his last. "I'm no longer in love with the sea."

"You sound as if you are. There's sadness in your voice."

"You don't miss much, do you? True, I do love the sea, Lady Virginia. The problem is that I fear it now. I was the Captain of The Willow, but the firm that owned her removed me from the command. A typhoon caught The Willow near Morocco in Africa, and I couldn't control the ship. I grounded her and was happy that I did. I knew I could not have kept her afloat even an hour longer. The owners didn't take kindly to my grounding her. They seem to have preferred that I died trying to keep her on the water. "I never knew such terror as at that moment. I witnessed my life pass before me, and it wasn't pretty. I was offered a job once after that, but I couldn't do it. I went to Dover, boarded the ship, and froze simply from inspecting it. So here I am, struggling to keep my body alive."

"That's sad, Nathan. Do you think you will ever overcome your fear of the ocean?"

"I don't think about it."

She finished her apple and tossed the tiny core over her shoulder. "What about me? Are you afraid of me?"

He chuckled nervously and lied. "No, Virginia, I'm not afraid of you. I rather like you. It's just that I have nothing to offer you but a harsher life than you've had. Nothing bloody good grows in Bower's Point, Delaware."

She stretched her legs and rubbed them through her skirt. She removed her scarf, wiped her face, and shook it out. She felt him watching her and turned her head to look at him.

"I haven't asked you for or expected anything except your coat, Nathan. If I must also take what's inside the coat, I think I can live with that." She liked the comical way his brows shot upward and tightened the loose skin around his eyes.

She giggled at what she saw. "That's a bloody charming look. It makes you look younger."

"You're an insufferable, bloody woman! Does my coat mean that much to you?"

"Only if you come with it."

“You don’t know what you’re getting into. You’re a woman who doesn’t belong in this place. You’re a true Virginia Rose. You should be on a rich plantation where you can grow and blossom and be dressed in fine linens and silks.”

“You sound very romantic right now.” The sincerity struck her and brought a rush of pink to her cheeks. “I think I can decide where I wish to blossom, Nathan. Flowers do that, Virginia Roses do that, wherever they are needed, wanted, and loved, even a little.”

He disbelieved what he heard her say because all he knew was the bare existence of Bower’s Point.

“Why do you talk so well? I’ve known many captains who were fierce and foul-mouthed creatures.”

“I came from a wealthy family of educated captains. I was a member of the Royal Navy for King George. When my commitment was over, I chose to go commercial. The new world, America, offered the opportunity for financial gain and satisfaction to boot. Sometimes I talk like a sailor, but only when angry about something. Mostly, I try to avoid it. It gives the people here a small amount of respect for me, even though it’s false.”

“Good. Do you sleep out-of-doors always, or do you have a dwelling?”

He stretched out his legs and leaned back on his hands. “I have two small rooms over there on the edge of town. I’m not sure of this. It’s too sudden.”

“Well, I’m fairly sure, so that’s good enough for me for tonight anyway.”

They sat a while longer under the tree and talked. Then they walked on to the small collection of houses, and buildings that lined the shore and the docks of Bower’s Point. Nathan’s rooms were at the back side of the house. There was one bedroom and one kitchen with a separate entrance from the rest of the house.

Virginia inspected the place. “Hmm. You were correct on the small. However, you’re one person, and it’s probably perfect for you.”

He nodded. “It’s about the size of the quarters on a ship, and I’m used to that.”

She opened the three windows and pulled out a chair from the table. She wiped off the dust and sat down. “Very quaint, Nathan. I like it.”

He shook his head. “Virginia?”

“What?”

“You don’t belong here. I think you’re pretty, and I don’t want to see you waste your life. Please go. Knowing you would be nice, but please, go.” He realized it sounded desperate, but again it was sincere.

“I’ve told you once that I’m old enough to decide what I want. If I say I like it, then I do. So don’t make me repeat myself.”

He nodded and said nothing.

“Why is the stove cold?”

“Because I don’t usually cook. When I do, I do it outside in the summer. I take meals with the landlord and his wife the rest of the time. They’re a very charming couple.”

“What do you cook?”

“I roast fish over a wood fire. I have a grate with a long handle, and I season the fish, and the smoke adds a lot of flavors. Then, I eat it with bread and cheese from the traders.”

“Does this place have an eating establishment?”

“It does, but the people don’t eat there often. The owner’s a lousy cook. Everything is salty and tastes the same, like fish. Even the beef, when he gets it, tastes like fish. A bloody mess if you ask me.”

She laughed. "Well, I think he'll hire me once he's tasted my cooking. I have the knack of making foods taste like they should taste."

"You're sure of that?"

"That I can cook or that he'll hire me?"

"Both."

"I'm as sure of that as I am of you."

He sighed and shook his head. "How sure of me are you? You might be disappointed."

Her answer was delivered with tenderness and confidence, and it stunned him. "You'll become aware of that as we go on, Nathan. I'll say that you'll attend church within a year and thank God for meeting me. You'll see."

A huge grin flowed across his face, and he rocked on his heels as he watched her. He looked like a little boy who had learned a great secret about his mother. "No, I won't be going to church. There's no church in Bower's Point. The place is so wild even God's clergymen don't dare come here."

"You're bad," she teased.

Later that night, she ate with the landlords, who both liked her very much. They wished her luck with her prospects of getting hired at the eatery and agreed the place sorely needed a good cook.

She returned to the rooms with Nathan, and they talked for an hour.

She stood and asked where people bathed in Bower's Point.

"They do that in the ocean. There's a lot of water there."

"Oh, you're so funny. See me laughing?"

He took her to the door and pointed to a small building about sixty feet behind the house. "Behind that building yonder, there's a well with a rope and bucket. Not far beyond that is a tub. It's not often used this late at night."

She nodded and left him alone.

He watched her walking and sighed. "Lord, how can I do this? Will you give me a little help? I know I can't do it on my own. I can't even care for myself."

He went in the opposite direction and sat down on the dune's edge overlooking the sandy beach below. He watched the waters flowing lazily back and forth across the sand. The moonlight made the foam look like tiny lights were inside. "If the moonlight were red, the lights in the foam would be the color of Virginia Roses," he said to the air.

"That's sweet," she spoke from behind him.

He twisted around sharply. "Bloody hell, Wench! I'm going to have to put a bell on you! You'll make my heart stop someday."

She giggled. "That was sweet. You really are a romantic soul."

"I never considered that in myself. You've affected my mind a little, I guess. This is so bloody unusual."

"All Virginia Roses are unique, Nathan. We're rare, and that makes us hard to find. However, the man who gets one of us is fortunate. We bring good luck to our men. We give them a greater love than any other woman can. They, in turn, give the same love back to us, and it has been going on forever, Nathan."

He stared at her glistening, moonlit eyes and felt chilled in the night breeze from the ocean. He wished he could stand there forever, caught in that moment, versus the harshness that would surely follow.

She turned and pointed to the little building. "Over there is where people wash up around here, sir. There's a bucket on a rope, and it's usually vacant this time of the night."

He started to touch her face, but she stopped him. "Not yet, my darling. Go."

He stepped around her, and she remained on the dune alone.

She folded her hands and spoke to the sky. "Thank you, Father, for letting me find him. You have been kind and generous to me so far. I hope I can continue to find favor with you. He's a kind man and strong inside, even though he doesn't know that yet. Thank you. I think we'll make it here. It's not a bad place for a good beginning."

She returned to the rooms, lit a candle on the kitchen table, and sat waiting for Nathan.

He came in shortly and sat on the bed, removed his shoes, and placed them on the floor by the foot of the bed. Then, he took off his shirt and pants, lay back on the bed, and looked at her.

She remained at the table and watched him curiously. "What are you doing?"

"Going to bed. What does it look like?"

"It looks like you think I'm going to sleep there too."

A dumbfounded look appeared on his face. Finally, he opened his mouth and could say nothing.

"You take a lot for granted, don't you? I hardly know you." She stood and turned, keeping him from seeing her smile.

"Then sleep where you are bloody comfortable," he growled and lay down hard. When he did, his head hit the wall. "Ouch and damn!"

"I will." She unbuttoned her skirt, stepped out of it, folded it, and placed it across the back of a chair. "The floor will do nicely. I'm used to hard surfaces, you know."

"I don't bloody know!"

She blew out the candle and listened to him sigh.

"Virginia Rose! Get your backside over here and into bed, or I'll keel haul ya tomorrow for the pleasure of the sharks."

"If you insist, I'll join you because I detest sharks."

She crossed the floor and lay on the bed beside him, rocking her feet back and forth. "Is this what you want?"

He rolled over on his side. "Sometimes a woman should be a wench and just be quiet." He kissed her and was happy she said nothing more.

CHAPTER TWO

Virginia landed a job at the restaurant, and the restaurant's business increased. She and Nathan got free meals as part of the deal. The rooms she had cleaned to her satisfaction, and she had located a Bible, a present from his mother. She would read it to him at night, although he insisted, he could do that himself. He now looked forward to the end of his typical days after mending fishing nets and sails. Life flowed smoothly, but one month drifted into three months before Virginia Rose disappeared.

Nathan spent three restless nights, not closing his eyes before dawn. He spent his days working the nets, numb and staring at the sea as if the waves would tell him why her disappearance was mysterious. Then, on the fourth evening, he wandered home, and she sat at the table as serenely as if she had always been there.

"Hello, Nathan. How was your day?"

He stared at her and the basket of fruits on the table. Her presence upset him, but he was so happy to see her back to rail against her.

"Where the bloody hell have you been, woman?"

"I took a walk, my darling. Sit down, please."

"That wasn't right, just leaving like that. It hurt, not knowing if you would ever come back. I know you have the right to leave, but why didn't you tell me you were going?"

She smiled sweetly. "I'm sorry, love. I'm impetuous sometimes. I didn't mean to hurt you. I thought you would know by now that I'll be around for a long time."

He nodded. "Where did you come up with that idea?"

"That's not important right now. You might be thinking bad things, but you shouldn't. We need to have a talk about us."

"Us? We've had this talk before. You know what my limits are. I can't support a wife. I have no access to the family's wealth and fortune."

She sighed and closed her eyes. "Have I ever given you any sign that I am unhappy living here with you?"

He said nothing.

"I ask for little Nathan Merriweather. But the biggest thing I ask is the easiest thing that you can give, your love. It's all I want and all I need. However, we can't live like this much longer."

He sighed. "If you can accept the life I can offer you, my beautiful, misplaced Lady, I would love to marry you. You're one good thing that has come into my life, and I know how sad I'd be if you ever left me. I feel guilty not being able to keep you as I would like. You deserve more than the harshness of Bower's Point."

Her face glowed. "Then we will be married?"

He nodded, and once more, his boyish grin emerged. "How? Did you forget that there are no clergymen here?"

"There's one north of Dover. Two days from now, Minister Reginald Dawson will arrive. We need to find a place for him to stay for one night. Then, on Saturday, he will marry us on the dune overlooking the beach, where you looked at the waves and saw Virginia Roses in the red moonlight."

She pointed to the basket of fruits. "This is a pre-wedding gift. Fruit is good for you. It'll make you healthy for a honeymoon. I got it for cleaning up a grocery store in Dover."

He shook his head, stunned by her news. "Virginia Rose, you are amazing. I really mean that. Do you know what you do to people?"

She shrugged and nodded. "Sometimes I do." Her gaze softened. "I told you that we bring good luck to our men, and I meant that. I will do it for you. Just wait and see, my love. Someday you will overcome the fears haunting you, and you will be back on the ocean. Our love will continue through the years, long after our bodies are laid to rest, and our souls are in heaven. The love of a Virginia Rose can do that. A coffin and a grave can't bury love. But it will come to life and release a great healing force when there is too much pain."

He studied her as goose bumps ran up his arms. "You have a great way of talking, my love. I would have considered myself lucky to have known you, even if you hadn't returned."

"But I did return, and I always will."

She went to work the following day as if nothing had happened. She announced her wedding plans and arranged for the clergyman's arrival and lodging.

There were cheers, joyous wishes, and trepidation among the Bower's Point residents. They were complacent and happy with their drinking and gambling establishments. They adored their prostitutes and the madam. They worried about the possibility of a blistering sermon and the guilt feelings to follow it. However, if it happened, they agreed to suffer it for Virginia Rose's happiness. They talked about her in small groups and whispers. They had not realized how well she had fitted into their lives, although she refused to join their way of life. Not until she left and returned with her news did they consider the possibility of losing her. They began to make bets on how long she would remain with the Captain after the wedding. Betting was small since they wanted her to stay.

Minister Dawson arrived late on Friday afternoon. A resident escorted him to the restaurant where Virginia worked. She took time off to take him to her rooms, where the landlord had made a space for him for the night.

"When was the last time a minister came to Bower's Point?" he asked the landlord.

The man scratched his head. "Nigh on twelve years ago," he replied.

"What do you do here?"

"Eat, work, sleep, and die."

"Does anyone get married or have babies in Bower's Point?"

"No. This is the first marriage in maybe fifteen years. There's been no need."

"Maybe there need to be more people who think right," Dawson commented. He turned to Virginia. "Thank you, Virginia. I'll wander around for a while. I'll talk to you and Nathan later tonight."

"I need to be the one thanking you, sir. It's very kind of you to travel here for me. It makes me feel that I'm doing the right thing." She left him to return to the restaurant.

He had dinner with them that night and discussed the ceremony.

"Virginia Rose," Dawson said, "I don't know how you can live here. You're like a jewel that has been carelessly tossed into a privy. How can you find love and a life where neither can exist?"

She blushed. "Sir, you flatter me. I'm just a simple woman, and I love this man dearly. I want to be his wife. I want to keep his home and bear his children. When you walked around the village today, did you notice flower gardens around some houses?"

“Yes.”

“If the place is filled with strangling evil, how could they survive? Our God gives them the necessities of life and someone to love and care for them. Here that’s necessary. In the wild, it’s not. I am the flower this good and kind man has planted. I will blossom here or anywhere because of his love and concern.”

Dawson shook his head. “You’re a strong woman, Virginia Rose. May God grant your every wish and prayer.”

The wedding occurred on the dune as Virginia wished, and all the citizens attended. Afterward, they celebrated with the first community picnic in twelve years and gave Virginia Rose and Nathan a Double Wedding Ring quilt as a combined gift.

The minister left them and did not rain brimstone down as they feared. However, he promised that he and others would regularly visit them. Life returned to normal soon enough.

*

Two more months passed, and Nathan came home late from work one night, opened the door, and found Virginia on her knees, sliding a box under the bed.

“Hello, Virginia.”

“Are you looking at my bottom again?”

“If that’s the part you have in the air when I come in the door, how could I not?”

“You’re not funny. What kept you tonight?”

“Jason wanted the one last-minute net finished for a fishing run early tomorrow, so I obliged. I consider it worthwhile because he paid well for it.”

“Yes, that’s good, dear. Are you hungry? Tonight’s the night for roasted fish. I rather enjoy that now.”

“As a matter of fact, I am.” He crossed the room and hugged her. “You look so beautiful just now, honey.” He kissed her.

“You’re funning me, right?”

He held her tightly. “No, I’m serious this time.”

“Have you washed your hands yet?”

He kissed her again. “No.”

“Then go and do that,” she complained. “I don’t want to smell like fish nets.”

“You don’t.”

“Go,” she told him sternly.

“You’re too moody,” he said, going to the door.

“You’re the one who wanted to marry me. Don’t complain about it now.”

He walked off, muttering. “All you had to do was give her the bloody coat. That’s all she wanted. You can still do that. Give her the bloody coat and send her packing.”

She watched him walking and talking to himself and doubled over with silent laughter.

“The minister said I was strong,” she said to the air. “He doesn’t know Nathan. He has to be strong to put up with me.”

He returned to the room and found her roasting the fish on the wood fire. He put his right hand under her nose.

“Well?”

She sniffed. “That smells much better. Thank you.”

“What’s gotten into you? For the last two weeks, you’ve been acting strange.”

“You. You’ve got into me.”

“I’ve gotten into you?”

“Yes, you have. You got into me. I was willing to take the coat, but you insisted on coming along. You got into me, and I can’t seem to get you out.”

He threw up his hands. “You’re impossible sometimes. I want to slap you. Do you want to get me out?”

“Why on earth would I want that? With you, I’m so alive and full of love. Why would I wish to throw that away?”

“If you were a man, I could thrash you and be done with it, you know? Knock the tar out of you and break a few teeth. What’s wrong? Tell me!”

“It’ll just upset you.”

“I’m already bloody angry, Virginia!”

Her voice and face grew wistful. “I want to leave here. It’s not a good setting for children to grow up in.”

“We’ve been over this before. You’re a hard-headed, obstinate wench! We are. What did you say?” he interrupted himself.

“It’s not a good setting for children.”

“Are you with a child? Like you’re pregnant?”

“That happens between husbands and wives very frequently. That’s the purpose of marriage.”

“Well, I’ll be.”

“Be what?”

“I’ll be wondering what we’ll do to live and raise a bloody little baby.”

She radiantly smiled as she pulled out the fish and stripped off a piece of the browning flesh with a sharp knife. She deftly removed the morsel with her lips.

“Umm, this is delicious. I’m happy you got me to try this the first time. It’s a good meal.”

“How far along are you?” he asked, ignoring the fish.

“I’d say about a month.” She placed the fish back over the fire. “Give or take a week.”

He moved behind her and wrapped his arms around her. “This complicates things, but we’ll adapt somehow and give it a life. I’m very pleased about this.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” She leaned into him. “If I offered you a way out of here, would you accept it and go with me?”

He squeezed her and patted her stomach. “I would, sweetheart. But, by now, I also know that if you asked the question, you already have the answer in mind. So, let’s hear it.”

“Are you reading my mind, Nathan? A wife does need some privacy, you know.”

“When you stop with me, so will I.”

“That’s fair enough.” She moved the fish again and placed it on a stool to cool.

She took his hands in hers. “I don’t know what possessed me to come here. However, since I met you, I ceased to question it. It was no longer important. You became my priority. My husband, who died in the west, left me a house and land near Philadelphia. That terrible city didn’t suit my tastes. There were too many fancy women and overly proud men. So, I sold it and went to Dover, where I bought a farm with a house and barn west of the village. When the urge to depart hit me, I left it in the care of two people and came here. Now I know why I did. I came here because I was meant to find you. Now that I know our future is secure together, I want to go back and get on with a family.”

He hung his head and rubbed his face in her hair. “Damn, Virginia. You surely have the knack for making me feel unworthy of your love. I don’t want to live off a woman.”

“Nor do I want you to do that. I didn’t expect that at all. I expect you to overcome your fear of the ocean, and I’ll help you do that. Then you’ll be back doing what you love, sailing on the ocean. Then, when you return home to me, you can do other things you love. You’ll have the best of both worlds, and our love will prosper. Now tell me, have I ever spoken falsely to you before?”

“No. Where were you all my life?”

“I was a bud. Now I’m about to open my petals and give you the experience of a lifetime. We’ll produce a few of me to go along down the line for other men to enjoy and a few of you to give the women hope also.”

“You’re a truthful kind of bad, Virginia Rose.”

CHAPTER THREE

June 30, 1991

Virginia Rose Matthews stopped outside the office building in Dover, Delaware, and glanced around, fearful that someone who knew her would see her. She gulped from nervousness and opened the door. The interior of the building smelled of freshly installed carpet and had a calming effect on her. Nevertheless, she felt out of place for a moment, almost cheap. She glanced around again before reading the lobby sign to locate the name she wanted, John Bennington, Attorney at Law, Room 302. She went to the elevator, pressed the up button, waited nervously until the doors opened, and hurried inside. She was glad the car was empty and grabbed her queasy stomach when it jerked upward.

The doors opened, and she stepped out into the second hallway. She looked around, turned left, opened the door to Room 302, and introduced herself to John Bennington's receptionist.

"I'm Virginia Rose Matthews. I have an appointment with Mr. Bennington."

"First-time consultation?"

"Yes."

The receptionist automatically handed her a clipboard with a pen.

"Have a seat and fill this out, please. Return it when you're done."

She completed the form and handed it to the receptionist, who told her again to be seated.

Doors opened one at a time, and people exited rooms. Some of them were dressed expensively, and some were not. Virginia relaxed slightly, watched people pass her, and listened to snippets of their conversations.

A robust male voice alerted her. "Virginia Rose Matthews?"

She snapped her head around to look at him.

He was perhaps thirty with brown hair and blue eyes, but not as old as she had imagined. He wore gray pants with light navy pinstripes and a long-sleeved white shirt. His tie was dark blue with paisley designs. She thought him handsome but too young to be an experienced attorney.

She stood and approached. "Hello, Mr. Bennington. I'm Virginia Rose, the Eleventh."

"The eleventh?"

"I was the eleventh one since the first one started us. We're getting close to the first dozen of Virginia Roses."

"This way, please," ignoring the comment and walking away.

She followed and thought, "He's too young to represent me and rude. I hope it doesn't turn to insults, or I may be in jail again soon."

She went into the office, and he motioned absently toward a chair. "Do sit down." The paper she had filled out and another folder were on his desk.

He looked at the paperwork and read through the list. "You were arrested for Forgery 3rd, Drinking Under Age, Terroristic Threatening, Assault 3rd, and Prostitution. So why are you here?"

The frustration she did not wish to show crept into her voice anyway. "That's a stupid question. Because I need a lawyer. Why else would I be here? There are many other places I would rather be."

He studied her and guessed her to be close to twenty. Her black hair was curled and pinned back with a red comb. She wore a brown skirt that stopped at the knees and a yellow blouse. She

had a small nose between two very black penetrating eyes. She had full cheeks that gave her a more youthful appearance than twenty. As far as he could determine, the only cosmetic she used was light red lipstick.

“What I meant was, I don’t handle these cases. I take cases of homicide, grand theft, armed robbery, and such. Sometimes drug offenses, but not usually, unless they come along with the package.”

She frowned. “So, what you’re telling me is, unless I become wickeder, I don’t rate a lawyer?”

He laughed. “No, Virginia Rose, you don’t have to become wickeder. In fact, I wouldn’t recommend that to anyone. What I mean is that you’ll have to find another lawyer to handle your case.”

She frowned again and pulled at her lower lip, exposing her white teeth. “You’ll bill me for this visit, though. Right?”

Again, he laughed. “No, I won’t bill you for this visit. So why are you fighting this anyway? The evidence is hard to refute.”

“Whatever that word means, I don’t like it. Are you sure about not billing me?”

“Yes.”

She sighed and started talking freely. “I did drink at the party. That’s not in dispute. The forgery, well, I did that on a dare. I didn’t think it would be used for theft. I thought it was a joke, and I showed off my talent, and it was unfortunate that I left the practice cards in my purse. That was dumb, I know. I guess I’ll have to take what comes with that. The other charges? They’re the ones that irritate me.

“The man I assaulted followed me from the street outside the party and made sexual comments and suggestions. He offered me money for sex starting at \$2. He just wouldn’t stop. Finally, I turned and told him the minimum was \$300, thinking he’d maybe be discouraged and leave. That’s when he called me a whore, and I kicked him in the nuts and scratched his face because I’m not. I threatened to cut his pecker off if he tried to touch me, and that’s when he pulled his badge. Creep!

“I mean, if he’s going to be an officer who picks up prostitutes, then let them make the offer. Let the arrest be legitimate. Don’t follow a woman for nine blocks being rude and nasty. That’s not very professional if you ask me, and you probably wouldn’t. All that does is make women want to shoot you just to shut your stupid mouth.”

She exhaled noisily, then sat silently, staring at the floor. “Well, you’re too young to be a good lawyer anyway. Who do you recommend?”

Her candor impressed him. “I’ve been known to change my mind at times. Maybe we can drop those three charges and obtain a plea bargain on forgery and drinking. Is that the outcome you want?”

“You’d better believe it! No Virginia Rose, not from the original one, has ever been a prostitute, and I won’t be labeled that now. I’m the first Virginia Rose to screw up this bad, but I’ll turn that around also.”

He studied her again, and he softened his voice when he spoke. “You think I’m too young?”

She nodded. “My mother would say you aren’t dry behind the ears yet. Are you?”

“Last time I checked, I was. I’ll tell you what, Virginia; I’ll talk to the District Attorney about this if you want me to. If he doesn’t want to listen and cooperate, I’ll make an exception and defend you.”

The emotional rush hit her hard, and she sat up straight, nearly lifting from the chair.
“Really? Are you serious?”

He nodded for the reply.

“What does a plea bargain mean?”

“It means that you’ll plead guilty to the charges of Forgery 3rd and Underage Consumption of Alcohol. You’ll not be tried for those offenses; in return, the District Attorney will drop the other offenses. Then, you’ll appear before a judge without a jury and be sentenced.”

She grimaced. “Phew! What could happen?”

He rubbed his chin. “Well, the worst case would be some jail time for forgery, and probation for the underage drinking charge. But, in addition, there could be counseling and paying fines and court costs.”

“But I might get jail time.”

He nodded. “That’s a possibility, but we’ll most likely know if that is a fact ahead of time. The court might be lenient since it’s your first offense, and that’s what I’ll recommend. You have no prior arrests, not even a traffic violation.”

She swallowed hard. “But if the District Attorney says the other charges are gone, they are, and I’ll never hear about them again?”

Again, he nodded. “That’s the deal.”

She considered her options a moment. “Wow! Okay. Give it your best try, Mr. Bennington. I hope you are usually successful at the District Attorney’s office?”

“This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it really does. I don’t mind paying for the wrong things I did, even though I was duped into it on a dare; however, not wrong for someone else. The thought of being a prostitute is very disgusting to me.”

“Okay, Virginia, I’ll give you a call on this sometime next week. So, you’re out on unsecured bail.”

“Yes. You can reach me at the number I put down or leave a message if I’m at work. If I still have a job left.”

“You won’t run away?”

“Not as long as the prostitution charge is on my name.” She stood. “Not after that either,” she added, smiling at his raised brows. “Relax, Mr. Bennington, I repay my debts.”

*

John investigated the charges in Virginia’s case and discovered several interesting facts he liked that would help the case in Virginia’s favor. He prepared himself and made an appointment to talk to George Mansion, the District Attorney of the Attorney General’s Office.

George delivered his opinion. “It’s an open-and-shut case, John. Why are you interested in this small one? You can do better.”

“Because of what she told me, George. We want to plea bargain on the Forgery 3rd and Underage Consumption of Alcohol and drop all the other charges.”

“After all the evidence? You did see it, didn’t you? I don’t believe this.”

“Sure did, and it’s impressive. You could give her what, maybe three years mandatory time or more?”

“Well, what’s your argument, John? Let’s hear it.”

John handed him his folder. "This is the argument against the remaining charges that she refuses to back down on, and I agree with her decision. The arresting officer has a history of twelve women assaulting him during the arrests. No other officer has that problem. I've talked with four women, and they told me the same story. They have agreed to testify in court. I think we have a thorn in the side of the police department. If it isn't pulled out soon, it will fester and get out of hand. The police department and you don't need that hassle."

George scrunched his face in deep thought. "Hmm. Will she plead guilty to the others? That doesn't make sense, John."

"If you talked to her, you'd understand. She said no other Virginia Rose, from the first one to her, has been a prostitute, and she won't be labeled one now. She readily admitted to the other charges. The others she's fighting came solely from him. Probably because he wanted to get into her pants. She is a beautiful young woman."

George's fingers drummed the desktop, and he stared at the picture of the Scales of Justice on the wall above the door.

"How often do I rush to take a case like this without being prepared, George?"

"Not too often. That's why I was surprised to hear you took her case. Let me talk to the Internal Investigations Department."

John smiled with relief because that was the phrase he wanted to hear. "I already did, but please verify it. They already have an investigation going. They're watching him."

"I'll get back to you tomorrow morning, but this looks good. We'll probably agree to whatever deal you offer." George shook his head.

John offered his best smug grin. "I know. I missed my calling. Sorry, police work isn't for me."

*

John called Virginia Rose two days later.

"You lost the plea bargain, right?" It was the phrase she had dreaded the entire time.

"No, didn't. I did some detective work and talked to the District Attorney. The three charges that bothered you are dropped. I will get back to you when we have a court date on the docket."

She sighed. "Thank you, Mr. Bennington. That was nice of you. Will there be jail time?"

"There is, but it will be waived. That's a start. We'll see what happens when the case comes before the judge. He can change it, but I'm doubtful he will. The judges usually trust our judgments on pleas. I'll call you then."

He made the call two weeks later and suggested she wear something finer than during her first visit.

"Why does it matter what clothes I wear?"

"The nicer you look, the sincerer you are, and the more apologetic you are, the better chance you have of the judge or jury being lenient. If you come across as lazy and non-caring, the worse the sentence. If you feel guilty and are sorry, show it. It won't hurt you, and it might help a lot."

"I can do that. Who's the judge?"

"Judge Wainwright. He's not as bad as the other ones. If it was Judge McNulty, he'd probably execute you to irritate me."

Virginia gasped.

He laughed. "Just kidding. He only tries severe felony cases, and you don't qualify."

She sighed and composed herself. "Watch yourself, John Bennington. I might get even for that joke."

He laughed again. "See you in court in three days. By the way, are you the first Virginia Rose to go to court?"

"Yes, and hopefully the last."

*

John waited in the lobby of the courthouse on The Green in Dover. He stared, totally entranced by her vision, when she finally arrived.

She wore black patent leather shoes, topped by an ankle-length dark-gray skirt. The white blouse, buttoned to the throat, had two roses embroidered on each sleeve with vines, leaves, and rosebuds running down to the cuffs. Her hair was styled, and the left side was pinned back with a gold comb. She carried a black leather shoulder bag.

"Good morning, Mr. Bennington. Is something wrong? You look strange."

"Good morning, Virginia," he stuttered. "You look, uh, stunning."

She smiled. "Good. I guess this looks better than what I wore to your office?"

"Considerably."

"Did I overdo it?"

He moved his eyes up and down her body. "No, not at all."

"Well?" she asked after a moment.

He shook himself out of the mood and turned.

She followed him into the courtroom, and several people turned and looked at her when she sat beside him.

The District Attorney looked to learn what the whispering was about and did a double take when he saw her. John shrugged his shoulders in response to the raised eyebrows.

Virginia Rose's case was the fifth on the agenda. When John arose, Virginia followed him through the small gates and stood beside him to face the judge.

"You have pleaded guilty to the charges of Forgery 3rd and Underage Consumption of Alcohol?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

Judge Wainwright scrutinized her. "You don't look like a criminal, Miss Matthews. But, before I pronounce the sentence, would you mind answering a few questions?"

"Don't be too outspoken," John warned, remembering their previous conversations.

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Why did you do the false ID card?"

"I did it on a dare, as a joke. I've always been good at cartooning, and one of my friends bet I couldn't make an ID card that would pass inspection. He had three copies and one original. I never asked where he got them. I just did the one for practice and then the final one. He took it, and I guess he used it for personal gain. I didn't do it for money, just for fun and to show off."

"How do you feel about that?"

"I feel bad about the whole thing, Your Honor. I never thought he would do anything wrong with it. I won't do it again; that's for sure. It's not fun being labeled a criminal."

"What about underage drinking?"

"I was already at the party when someone brought some beer and started passing it around. At first, I refused, but later I drank four. I didn't plan to, but I fell under the influence of a man there."

"Was that the same man who asked you to make the false ID card?"

She paused. "No. May I consult with my attorney before I answer, Your Honor?"

The judge nodded. "Request granted."

"What's up?" John whispered.

"How am I doing?" she murmured.

"Good so far. What's with answering this question?"

She moved closer and whispered.

John listened carefully and turned to the judge. "Your Honor, this is very irregular for a sentencing trial, but I would like both councils to approach the bench for a private conference. The answer could prove very delicate to the court."

The judge motioned them to come forward, raising his brows and staring at Virginia.

"What's up?" asked George.

"Your Honor, George, Miss Matthews requests that her answer not become part of the court record. The man involved in purchasing and distributing the alcohol is David Mansion, the District Attorney's minor son. She doesn't wish to mar his name."

"Oh, gosh!" sighed George and swiped his face. "You're kidding?"

"She named him, and I never asked about those charges. She said she was guilty and would take the punishment. I never thought to question her further into the details. Sorry. If I had, I'd have caught it earlier."

George frowned and felt ill. The judge looked across the courtroom at Virginia Rose, still standing silently.

"We'll have to deal with that separately, George," said the judge.

He smacked the gavel and dismissed the councils. "Let the court record show that His Honor withdraws the question," he told the recorder.

He cleared his throat and addressed Virginia Rose.

"Is there anything else you would like to say?"

"I am very sorry for what I have done, Your Honor. And rest assured that I'll never do it again. No more dares. No more drinking before I can do it legally."

"The Court of Common Pleas, in the State of Delaware, Kent County, sentences you to four years of confinement at Level 5 Women's Correctional Center in Wilmington for the charge of Forgery in the Third. Due to the circumstances, the sentence is reduced to two years' probation at Level 3, payment of court costs, and fines. Additionally, for the charge of Underage consumption of alcohol, you are sentenced to one-year probation at Level 1 to be served consecutively. Also, you are ordered to be evaluated for substance/alcohol abuse, and counseling or treatments as the Probation Office or Counseling Agency deems necessary.

"This Court hopes not to see you here again, Miss Matthews."

"It won't be on this side of the gates, Your Honor. Thank you."

CHAPTER FOUR

Virginia Rose left the courtroom feeling elated, thinking the back of John's ears would be dry if she checked. She thanked him and left, stopping at a pharmacy on her way home to buy some aspirin. She rarely took drugs but had a headache from all the stress. The route to checkout took her past the card aisle, and she mumbled.

"Maybe it would be nice and proper etiquette to send Mr. Bennington a thank you card."

"Why?" Self-asked. "What did he do for us?"

"He got us out of much trouble," she answered.

"You like him? Yuck! Beware your virgin daughter when the octopus arrives."

"Shut up," Virginia said.

She looked around and saw the clerk staring at her. She blushed, searched through the cards, chose one, and hurried to the checkout lane.

She went home, dropped her bag and purse on the kitchen table, and opened the front door. She retrieved and sorted the mail, tossing the junk mail in the wastebasket, and felt delighted to find a letter from Jolene Anderson.

She kissed it. "Alright, Jolene! It's about time. I hope where you go this time, you settle down and get a life without the freak around."

She left the bills on the table and carried the letter upstairs. She sat on her bed and read it.

Dear Virginia,

I hope this finds you in good health. I'm feeling well, as are Paula and Steve. But, again, George, the demon, is in jail, serving 3 to 5 on cocaine sales and use. So, as you can see, I've changed my name again and am ready to leave.

I finally convinced the courts to issue another restraining order, and he's been permanently barred from seeing the children. Paula's okay. He hurt her a lot, but she's recovered, and she doesn't show any signs of mental scars, keep your fingers crossed, okay.

I'll be in Dover in about three weeks after I leave here, which will be on July 1. If you have the time, between men, you might look for a house for me to rent. I wish to rent instead of buy this time. I want no more material things to hold me down if I must escape again. Only you know where I'm going; I want it to stay that way. Don't tell anyone if they should ask. I hope the pain doesn't follow this time. Anyway, this time, I will be armed. I will protect myself if the Courts can't or won't.

I hope to see your smiling face soon, my darling Virginia.

Jolene Anderson

"Great, Jolene." Virginia stood and whirled. "It's about time you were finally free from that jerk. Hurry on down, Sweets. Can't wait."

She took the comb from her hair and looked at herself in the mirror. "You're not all that bad-looking, Virginia. We'll have to work on straightening out your ass, though. After that, we don't need to be back in court again. It's okay if we're there watching John Bennington in action, but that's all, Babe. Got it?"

She wiggled her face and dressed in her lounging pajamas, went downstairs, turned on the radio to a rock station, sat down at the table, and took two aspirin. Then she wrote on the card, "Thank you very much, John Adam Bennington. Love, Virginia Rose."

"Aw, isn't that cute? You're too much Self, creative, witty, and original."

"You've got the headache because you think you love him," Self said. "Excuse me while I gag."

"Shut up, Self. Take a very long hike and leave me alone."

She addressed the envelope from a card she had picked up in his office, stamped it, and hung it on her mailbox with a clothespin.

"We'll see more of John."

*

John got the card in the mail two days later. He wrinkled his brow at no return address and opened it. The card was covered with bright-red roses in bouquets, and as he read the inside, he remembered her dress in the courtroom. He smiled and pinned the card to the wall behind his desk. He looked at it frequently during the day and the next morning before he went to court.

"Who's that card from?" asked Shirley, his secretary.

He grinned broadly and joked, "A secret admirer. She'll probably send flowers next week, Chocolates afterward, and then Italian violinists to serenade me. Are you jealous?"

"No, I'm not. I'm glad. You've been single too long."

"Don't start that again, Shirley. I don't want to see your sister who has fifteen cats or the one who has baby sharks in a 100-gallon tank in her living room. They're nice but not my type."

Shirley smiled. "Now, why would you think I would try to help?" she asked. "However, . . ."

John left her while she was still talking.

He met his client in the Courthouse lobby and went through the doors.

He looked around the visitors, as was his custom, and saw Virginia holding a sketchbook and pencils. She smiled and waved as he walked past. He nodded in return and went to the Defender's table. The judge entered, and after everyone was seated, she began to sketch the Judge, the District Attorney, and John.

She enjoyed John's commanding style when he was on the defensive and his rigor when on the offensive. She watched the judge and the District Attorney and could soon tell when he would get an objection, sustained or overruled. The presiding judge that day seemed to respect John and pronounced several overrules against the District Attorney, who responded with exaggerated groans and antics. At the end of the day, the client walked away, and the District Attorney agreed they did not have enough evidence. She smiled as John walked down the aisle and waved again. She liked the smile he flashed at her.

She sighed. "Well, Self. What do you think?"

"Yuck! If you can't do better than that, stay single," Self replied.

"Shut up," she ordered.

"Beg your pardon?" said a man in front of her.

She blushed and hurried from the building. She tried to find John in the crowd but could not locate him. Finally, after a few moments of bobbing around, she stood still and waited until the people cleared out of the way.

“Oh, well. It’s just as well he left. I’d have made a fool of myself anyway. What could I say to him that would have made sense?” When she turned toward the sidewalk, she bumped into him and dropped her sketch book and purse. Some papers fell free, and she squatted to pick them up.

“Hello, Virginia Rose.” He stooped to pick up the papers and helped her stand again.

Her face changed from pink to red. “That was unfair, John Bennington,” she said, reaching for the pictures he held.

He chuckled as he moved them from her reach. “Virginia, these are good.”

“They are not! They’re like kindergarten scrawls at best. Let me have them, please.”

He looked at her then. “What’s wrong? Didn’t you want to see me?”

“No, I was just passing by. I was bored, so I decided to stop and waste a few moments. Come on. Give me the papers.”

“You can have them all except this one.” He flipped through them again and pulled out one. The rest, he held. “Guess which one I kept?”

She sighed and shook her head. “The one where the Judge put a sword on your shoulder, dubbing you a Knight of the King’s Court. Am I right?”

“You are. And really, Virginia, you have talent. You could be a political cartoonist if you applied yourself. You could develop your own cartoon strip. You’re good; actually, better than good.”

“I’m not. This isn’t the way this was supposed to go. This is embarrassing.”

“Why? You said you’d make a fool of yourself, and you haven’t. The negatives don’t suit you. Thank you for the card and thank you for the sketch. I’ll put it on the wall in my office along with the card. That was thoughtful. Most clients just go their way after a case ends and never contact their lawyer unless they get into trouble again.”

She lowered her head and started fidgeting.

He laid a hand gently on her shoulder. “Look, don’t take it so hard. There’s nothing wrong with liking someone and letting them know. I’ll make this easy. I think you’re beautiful, but I’m single and like being that way. Also, you’re a little too young. I mean, you just turned twenty.”

Her head snapped up, and she delivered a tart answer. “Too young? So, what’s a good age for a woman to start dating you? Thirty? Forty? How about sixty-five? Pardon my comment, but you have a weird concept of women and dating. Also, if you think I want to date you, you’re very vain.”

“Sorry, Virginia.”

“There’s a difference between dating and friendship. I’m not in the habit of dating prehistoric cave dwellers who have been through the tar pits. They make lousy house pets.”

She snatched the pictures from his hand, except for the one he wanted, and walked away. “See you in the Sunday comic strip, Geezer.”

John scratched his head and watched her until she turned the corner.

“Well, John,” he said on the way to his car, “you didn’t have to upset her, did you? You need some practice in letting women down easily. A lesson in diplomacy would help too. Go home.”

*

Two weeks later, she appeared in the courtroom again with her sketchbook. She looked straight ahead when she saw him enter. She watched him and made some sketches. The judge, The Honorable Stanley McNaulty, contrasted sharply with the previous judge. He had no respect

for John and seemed to hate him. She was uncomfortable and felt sorry for John when every objection he made was overruled and every objection from the District Attorney was sustained. Virginia contemplated the actions and the dialog.

It appeared as if the judge wanted to railroad John's client to prison. She considered it rude and finally understood what he meant when he said he'd execute her to irritate him. "That wasn't a joke, and neither is this."

Within an hour, John mumbled nearly the same thought a little too loudly.

"What was that comment?" Judge McNaulty snapped.

"Nothing, Your Honor."

"You think I'm railroading your client? You're doing a good job of that already. You're doing it with your amateurish and immature courtroom practices, and this court does not appreciate your humor or disrespectful comments. I hold you in Contempt of Court, and I'll let you spend \$200.00 and five days in the city jail to rethink your courtroom attitude."

He banged his gavel and turned to Bennington's client. "I suggest you ask the firm for a competent replacement, Mr. Quade. Bailiff, remove Mr. Bennington. This court is recessed until 9:00 a. m. tomorrow morning."

He and Virginia Rose stood with the rest of the visitors.

"Your Honor," Virginia Rose shouted, her voice cutting through the mumbles and whispered conversation. "Your Honor, I've watched the proceedings, not only of your court but others. You should be glad that I'm not in a position of authority to remove you from the bench, or I would. Your behavior is a disgrace to the Criminal Justice System."

He dismissed her comments with a crude wave and disappeared.

Virginia Rose waved to John and mouthed the silent word, "Geezer."

After two long and stressful days, John received a visitor who surprised him and made him feel good.

"Hello, Virginia Rose. That was a good statement you made in the courtroom. I like that. Having someone outside who can see what I mean."

"Thank you. I don't know what possessed me to stand and say that. I felt that he was railroading the client to upset you. He doesn't want you to win a case in the hope of having you discredited."

She paused and asked, "Did I say that right?"

He gave her a thumbs up. "Precisely."

They spent a silent moment. "So, how do you like this place?"

"I don't. Perhaps I would feel at home if I were a criminal, but I don't."

She nodded. "What's the feeling?"

He contemplated a moment. "It's lonely. I live by myself and enjoy it, but this is forced loneliness, and I don't care about it."

The comment brought a look of satisfaction to her. "You're lucky. You have someone who'll come to see you. It was three days before anyone came to see me. They were upset when they finally showed up, yelling at me, and threatening me. So even though I wanted out, I almost would have preferred to stay."

"Thank you for coming, Virginia."

"I'm not too young to visit you?"

"Okay, I apologize. The remark was unkind, even though it was not intended that way."

She opened her purse, took out a piece of paper, and handed it to him across the table.

He laughed when he looked at a sketch of Judge McNaulty, hanging upside down in a courtroom with a rope around his testicles. At the bottom of the paper, she had written, "THE HANGING JUDGE."

She joined his unrehearsed and spontaneous laughter.

He handed the picture back to her. "I like this, but please keep it with you. I don't want to be found with it on me. It might make things worse. You can give it to me later."

She put it back into her purse. "Well, what are you going to do now?"

"Go back to my cell, I guess."

"What about when you get out of the dungeon? You know, I truly might not object if you wanted to date me. That is if we can surpass this annoying age difference."

He drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "You make me feel good, Virginia. I might want to date you when I get out. In fact, would you like to have dinner with me on Friday evening? We can celebrate my rehabilitated return to society."

She shrugged. "Let me check my calendar." She took a small book from her purse and flipped through it. "You're lucky. I have a cancellation on Friday. I'll fit you into my schedule."

"You don't talk like other women I know. Do all Virginia Roses behave and talk like you?"

She waved goodbye. "I'm going to starve myself for three days before that. I hope you have enough money left after your fine."

"You didn't answer my question?"

She nodded. "Yes. It's a genetic thing. It starts at age twenty and grows from there."

She enjoyed his boyish, puzzled look. "I'm just coming of age, John. It's lucky you found me at a good time in my life. See you later."

He scratched his head as she walked away. He did not want her to go.

*

Virginia visited him on Saturday and Sunday, went to the jail early on Monday morning, and waited until they released him.

"Welcome back to reality." She took him back to the courthouse to retrieve his car.

He swore and removed two tickets from the wiper of his car. "This sucks! I've already spent five days in jail and \$200.00. So now the cops want me to spend more."

She chuckled. "Want to go back and wait off the fines?"

"No, I don't! I'll deliver each one to JP Court #7 and pay them. I won't give McNaulty the satisfaction."

She shouted and applauded the decision. "Bravo! Go get 'em, Sir John Bennington."

"You think this is funny?"

She stepped close, kissed him lightly, and assured him, "Not in the least. I'm off to the Probation Office to give them money and talk to my probation officer. If not, they'll be after me. Then I'm going back to see my old employer. Hopefully, I'll get reinstated. He said he would help me, and I'll be able to make a living for myself. Then I'm going to starve myself until Friday evening. I hope you have enough money to feed me after paying all these fines."

She kissed him again before he could reply and walked gracefully across the street to her car.

He thought for a moment and scolded himself. "Shut up the complaint. Your fines are nothing compared to hers. You're lucky. You found her at a good time in her life."

CHAPTER FIVE

Thursday night, John called her and planned for their first date the following evening.

“How are you? Did you get any more tickets to round out your week?”

“Not yet.”

“How did your client fare?”

“Another lawyer took over my case, and the client walked. There were plenty of witnesses to put him somewhere else. Judge McNaulty praised the replacement for his capability. It pisses me off that he can’t see how prejudiced he is toward me.”

“Well, maybe someday your luck will change. It’s been known to a few men that Virginia Roses always bring much good luck in their mates. Do you want to be my mate?”

There was a moment of silence. “I hardly know you. This isn’t a good time to ask that question.”

She giggled and held her cheeks. “What? No speculation? You appear to the rest of the world to be a man with drive, ambition, and daring, and you can’t dream of how it would be to be my mate? You’re kidding, right?”

“Right! Yes, it has crossed my mind about how you’d fit into my life as a wife. However, I don’t like the picture just yet. I’ll wait for the previews to end and analyze the trailer again before I make any announcements. Okay?”

“That’s fair enough, but you don’t have to be so grumpy. I was only trying to make conversation.”

“I’m not grumpy.”

“You are too. You’re also presumptuous, considering how I’d suit you as a wife. We haven’t even gone on our first date, and you want me married, barefoot, and pregnant. Like, here’s some gum, blonde chick. Chew it, and let’s do it.”

“Just shut up! I think I’ll bring a lawyer along on our dates. See you later.” He hung up while she still laughed.

*

She wore a long black and white plaid skirt and a white blouse.

John told her it was a good choice because she would fit in many situations. She thanked him and slid deftly into the front seat of his car. He took her to the Blue Coat Inn on Silver Lake, and they dined on steak.

The whole date impressed her. “This is very thoughtful. Do I deserve this?”

“You do. I thought you would make a good biker’s wife the first time I saw you. But you didn’t look the refined woman you could be. Right now, I could picture you anywhere from a biker’s wife to the state governor’s wife. So, which would you like to be?”

“Wherever I will be loved, even a little. That’s where I belong and will grow and release my love. Whether it’s with a Pagan riding down the road on a Harley or as the First Lady of America isn’t important. The man who marries me will get a thousand-fold return of luck, love, and riches.”

He stared at her with his wine glass stranded between the table and his mouth. It struck him that under the surface, she said, ‘But the best place for me would be with you.’ He shook his head to break the trance and forcefully looked away from her eyes. He took a drink of wine.

“You have a brilliant way with words. Have you ever considered hosting a talk show on television?”

Her laughter had a delicate ring. “Heavens no. That’s the last thing I’d consider. I’ve watched them, and I can’t picture myself there. I don’t want publicity. I’d rather be hidden and blossoming in someone’s garden, where I can feel wonderful and help people. I’m going to go out of my way for Jolene. However, I don’t want everyone to know it. I want to keep it between God and me.”

“How about a cartoonist or writer?”

“That I could handle, if I could fit into a marriage. Right now, the genes have just kicked in, you know. I need love, and I need a marriage to turn me on. I told you already, it’s in the DNA of Virginia Roses.”

He took another drink of wine and tackled the steak again. “You are a strange woman. This is the year of single mothers, high divorce rates, working women, and women coming out of the closet with women lovers. You’re out of place.”

“No. No way. The world is out of place. The other people out there are unbalanced and empty of pride. They live degraded lives without knowing what’s worse, what’s better, what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s a universal lie, or what’s a universal truth. This woman knows what she needs and what she wants. This woman also knows that everything she wants will follow when she gets what she needs to drive her life.”

Once more, he was entranced, and all movement and sound seemed to stop. Once more, he forced his eyes away from the alluring ones inside her intense face.

“Am I making you uncomfortable, John?”

“Maybe. I’m not sure how I feel right now. I’ve never considered these things before. Maybe I’m too slow for you, which makes me feel unbalanced.”

She relaxed and drained her water glass. “No, you’re not too slow for me. If you were, we wouldn’t be sitting here talking. We’d be where they throw peanut shells on the floor and play tear-in-your-beer songs. There would be no fine steaks or German wines. Instead, we’d be thinking of leaving right now to park the car and make babies in the back seat.”

She paused to look into his eyes once more. “We’re here and having this discussion because of you. I’m merely reflecting on what you have on your mind and where you see yourself in life. I reflect your feelings. Right now, they’re warm and wonderful. Hold onto them. You’re great, and I like you. You needn’t be bashful in inviting me out again. Okay?”

John paid the bill, and they walked out.

“I planned on a movie, but if you don’t mind, I’d rather just take a walk along the lake,” he suggested.

“Suits me fine.” She took his hand. “If I get too intense about things, tell me. I’ll back off the subject and let you get to it your way. Is that a good deal?”

“Yes. During dinner there, the switch from playful nymph to enlightened philosopher was too sudden for me to follow. Maybe it doesn’t work that way for you.”

She smiled and leaned against him as they walked. “Okay. And I have a solution. I’ll start carrying a bullhorn and make a one-minute warning when I’m ready.” She cupped her hands over her mouth. “Warning, John! I’m ready to get serious in one minute!”

He playfully pushed her to the left, and she returned to shove him the opposite way.

They sat on a park bench beside the lake, where they could see the moonlight reflecting on the gently moving waters.

“Who’s Jolene?” he asked.

“She’s a close friend and really like a sister to me. She’s had a rough life so far. Right now, she’s getting ready to move to Dover. She wants to be near me and have the security of hiding. Her ex-husband’s a mean demon. She constantly fought to keep him away from her and her children. The Courts have issued restraining orders out the ass on him, and he still gets to her to screw her up.

“The courts have put him in prison many times, and when he gets out, his favorite thing is to put her in the hospital. The last time she was in the hospital, the bastard tied up his daughter and raped her on Jolene’s bed. After that, the courts put him in prison for trafficking cocaine and dropped the molesting charges. Does that make sense?”

John did not misread the feelings at that time. “No, it doesn’t. That’s why I won’t take cases involving child or spouse abuse. I can’t defend them when I want to hammer them on the District Attorney’s table. I’m sorry there are men in the world like Jolene’s ex. They make life difficult for real men.”

“Real men like you, John.” She leaned across him and kissed him. Then, she moved her head to his shoulder, and he put his arm around her.

He stared at the gentle waves and suddenly felt a chill running up his back.

“You know, if the moonlight was red, the foam on the water would look like a million Virginia Roses.”

Virginia studied his face as she blushed. “Oh wow! That was very romantic.”

He shook himself, puzzled whether he had thought of that comment on his own or whether something else had and planted the thought in his mind. He made no response except to squeeze her tightly.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They walked in silence to the parking lot and his car. He drove her home, and she asked him inside for a moment. The house was not as large as his apartment, but it was adequate for her and much cleaner than he had imagined.

He sat on the sofa and looked around at the pictures on the wall. One was of Virginia and a blonde-haired girl, taken at a circus.

“Is that Jolene?” he asked, pointing to the picture when she returned with a glass of water and one for him.

“Yes. That’s when she was young and happy, and in love. She looks twenty years older now, even though it’s only five.”

She sat beside him and handed him a glass. “I hope this is O.K. I’m not old enough to drink yet.”

He took a taste. “This is fine, Virginia. I rarely drink myself. I don’t like it.”

He rubbed her back gently. “If you need any help with Jolene, let me know.”

“Thanks, John, because I might need some help. We’ll see. Anyway, I really want you to meet her.”

He pulled her back against his shoulder, and she snuggled against him, kicking off her shoes as she moved her legs to the sofa. He sat there for a long time, simply holding her.

“You asleep?” he asked.

“No, just enjoying myself.”

He moved her around and kissed her. “You’re so beautiful. I’m glad to have known you and overcome my bad attitude.”

He kissed her again. When she finally moved away, she pushed his hand from her knees and squirmed around to stand up. She shivered and got herself under control.

"Sorry, John. That was getting too close to me, and I'm not ready for this yet. I'm sorry. I should have stopped it sooner, but it felt too good."

He sat up, not knowing whether to believe or disbelieve her. Finally, he reached out a hand, and she gave him one in return.

"I'm sorry. I don't normally do that on the first date."

"You needn't be sorry. I liked it, but no man has ever had me yet, and I'm not ready to start now. I can wait until I'm married. Most women don't understand that if all parts of the relationship are good and wholesome, sex will never be a problem. I understand that. Is that too deep for you to understand?"

"No."

"Then may I add something else?"

He nodded.

"Along with that, I also believe in purity in marriage. When my husband takes me, there will never be another man who will do that. If it happens, it will be by force, and I'll die fighting him. Virginia Roses are very faithful women."

He agreed and headed toward the door. When he was on the porch, he kissed her goodnight. "May I take you out again next Friday?"

She readily agreed. "Thank you. I had a wonderful night. I will look forward to next Friday. I'll be ready."

She closed the door and leaned against it; her hands spread out behind her. She turned out the lights and ran upstairs, jumping on the bed and wallowing around, messing up the covers.

"Wahoo!" she shouted. She picked up a picture from the nightstand and lay back, talking to it while panting.

"Mama, I wish you were here to see this. This is great. What wrong things I've done is not, but this feeling I have inside me sure is. I wonder if you felt that with Dad. I will pay for the bad and let this feeling go wild."

She sat up on one elbow and still held the picture. "Hey, Mamma, you told me there seems to be a problem with us, Roses. Will I be the one who breaks the chain? I want to live past thirty-seven. I don't only want to see my children but also my grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It's not fair to be popped off in the prime of life at thirty-seven or before, like you. Can I be the one to change that? The world's making progress with DNA coding. Maybe the doctors can help me. It would be great to live longer."

She sighed and lay back, momentarily exhausted. "He's so romantic. He said the foam looked like a million red Virginia Roses. That's so sweet."

*

John took Virginia to The Nuts Steak House on Governors Avenue the following Friday. He tried to get some conversation and could not always get a response. She looked withdrawn and sullen.

He finally asked the reason for her mood. "What is it? If you're not having a good time, say so, and I'll take you home. I don't want to torture you."

She smiled at his concern. "It's not you. This is about five weeks since I started the counseling that was part of the sentence. The counselor isn't a very kind woman, but the

Probation Office said I had to take what they had, and she was the best. So, I feel sorry for the other clients if she's the best.

"She can't understand that I drank the beer because it was there, and I wanted to act silly like the other people. I didn't do it because my father felt me up when he put me to bed at night or molested me. I didn't drink because I wanted to hide the shame of prostitution. She doesn't want to hear the truth and take it from there. She wants to read something into it of improper morals or bad breeding from my parents.

"That's bugging me. Also, I'm thinking of what it'll be like with Jolene and the kids in my house until we find her a place and she has a job. I'm thinking of how this might interfere with my seeing you. Right now, I want that, and I don't want you to stop coming around because she's there."

She stopped and looked at her plate. "Can I add something else, or have I dumped too much already?"

He reached across the table and raised her chin with his hand. He pulled her lower lip open with his finger and let it flap shut. He grinned and told her to continue for as long as she liked.

She sighed and sniffed. "Well, the main thing, John, besides the counseling, is this: No Virginia Rose, including my mother, has ever lived beyond the age of thirty-seven. That's weighing heavily upon my mind. It didn't bother me until I met you and started caring. Now I sit and wonder what will happen. Knowing what I do, will I go crazy at thirty-six or sooner? Will I have children and be able to love them to the day I die, or will I flip out and scare them to death before it's my turn?"

She sighed again and waited for a response.

The silence grew too heavy around their table. "Is that true? All Rose women die at or before age thirty-seven?" he asked.

"Yes. Ever since the first one died in 1784."

"How did she die?" He was grasping for time, unsure of what had caused him to grow nervous as she talked; other than that, he did not want her to die so soon.

"We don't know. I don't know. I just know that when she died, she was thirty-seven. And Virginia Rose, after that, also did, including my mother. She was thirty-seven and one month and died of a heart attack. Just Bam! Gone. No second chance. No recovery. Gone."

"Do you think you can change that, Virginia?" Again, he felt the chills returning as he had the previous week on the park bench.

She shrugged and ran her right hand through her hair, grabbing a few locks and twisting them around her fingers. "I'd like to do that. I'm sometimes sorry that my Mamma ever told me, and I've wondered why she did. I'd rather not know. Yes, I'd love to change that. Maybe it would change the Virginia Rose DNA and hormones down the line. It sucks to die when you're in the prime of your life and have so much more to experience."

He placed a hand against her cheek and spread his fingers apart slightly. "Then change it you shall, Virginia Rose Matthews. You will be the one to break the pattern of injustice, destroy the curse, and restore the cycles to be what they should be. I'll help you."

He said it with such authority that she smiled warmly, kissed his fingertips, thanked him, and promised, "I'll trust you, John. Teach me how."

He moved his hand from her and sat back in his seat. He looked around the room strangely, feeling like a spirit or unseen force had just left him. He let his eye tour end up on Virginia. She looked contented and loving now.

John did not like chaos or uncertainty. Therefore, the confusion annoyed him. “What did I say?”

He knew he had said something, but it was vague and hidden, like a road’s white line in a heavy fog.

“That you would help me live past thirty-seven. That makes me feel great.”

“Would you like to call it an evening?”

She nodded. “Jolene will be here at nine in the morning. Why don’t you come over sometime tomorrow? I’d like to see you in the daytime, and you can meet Jolene and her kids.”

He promised to drop by and drove her home. When he kissed her good night on the front porch, she clung to him briefly as if she were trying to extract something from him by sheer force. Then she moved away and stood on the porch until his car disappeared into the night.

CHAPTER SIX

In his dream state, John walked down a dirt road, his destination an inland bay from the ocean. He passed many neglected and burned-out shacks. He looked sadly at the roofs of a few flooded ones, some covered with mud and sand. Pieces of driftwood and horseshoe crab shells lay strewn around. They smelled horrible and attracted swarms of flies. He felt like death nipped at his heels as he walked. Finally, he turned left when the water and mud became too deep and headed northeast. He rounded several more rotted shacks and stopped.

A woman stood upon the top of a sand dune. The wind blowing from the ocean tossed her hair and whipped the bottom of her brown flared skirt. Her hands were folded, and she looked calmly at the waves breaking over the beach below. Then, she turned, waved to him, and beckoned with her right hand.

He grew closer, and he could see her face clearly. The slight wrinkles and weathered look could not hide the beauty beneath. She looked out of place there on the dune but very contented.

“Welcome, John Adam Bennington. I’ve waited many years for you.”

“How long have you waited for me?” he asked, puzzled why a stranger would wait so long.

“For over 200 years, I’ve waited for you to find me.”

“Why do you want me?”

She pointed to the waves lapping against the shore. “You must be like the ocean, John. The ocean is strong, constant, and powerful. It sustains life, billions of lives. You must be like the ocean but sustain only one life. Be strong, John Adam Bennington. The ocean can destroy a fleet of ships and stop the slaughter of war. So, can you. In the coming painful events and stark terror, you must be as the ocean for your Virginia Rose.”

“That’s a strange comment from an equally strange woman who has waited 200 years to meet me. What’s this about?”

She placed a fingertip to her lips and then moved it to his. “We will meet again, John. I promise you.” She smiled and faded as the beach disappeared around him.

John sat up in bed and turned the light on. He took a moment to allow his senses to focus and slipped his hands beneath the sheets, confident that his bare feet would have carried back sand. Instead, he shivered in the chilled room until a pleasing warmth returned.

“That was a powerful dream. I wonder who she was? She said I must be strong like the ocean, constant and powerful. That is a strange thing to say. How can I be that way? I’m not the ocean.”

His watch said 2:00 a.m. He extinguished the lights and went back to sleep quickly. He woke at 8:00 a.m. hugging his pillow, went to the kitchen, and started the coffee perking while he showered and dressed in blue slacks and a red polo shirt. He fixed a cup of coffee, went to his den, and opened his briefcase to review three cases he would have to deal with in the coming week.

Halfway through the first page, he closed it and moved to the balcony from the living room. The parking lot and the playground overflowed with children and their parents. He watched them until he grew restless. Finally, he finished his coffee and sighed.

“Well, John, you may as well go where you want to be and forget work for a while.”

He turned his answering machine on and drove to see Virginia Rose.

Jolene turned out to be more relaxed and beautiful than Virginia had portrayed. She looked older than she should, but John reflected that the worn look would disappear if she could have a long rest. In addition, her body was rather muscular, and she did not appear to be a weakling. She and John immediately liked each other.

The children did not share Jolene's enthusiasm. Instead, they acknowledged his presence and returned their attention to the television. They reminded John of cats that reacted the same until a specific need surfaced. He felt sure that their behavior would change when they got hungry. His theory proved true.

They started fussing when the cartoon shows ended. By that time, they had decided that John must be weird. They had never encountered an adult who laughed at the cartoons with them.

Steve wandered across the floor and planted his right foot on John's lap without prompting. He stood and watched him, one finger hooked inside his left cheek.

"What do you want?" John asked the child and smiled at the curious face.

"Tie," he answered without removing the finger.

John obliged the request. "Is that better?"

Steve nodded. He climbed onto the sofa beside him, sat back, crossed his legs like John, and giggled.

Paula watched the scene from the floor and chose not to ignore them. She knew that if Steve began something with the strange man, she needed to be with him. She stood with a perplexed look displayed on her face. She viewed Steve and John, took one step toward the sofa, stopped, turned, and sat with her back to them.

John noticed the room had grown quiet. He looked over his shoulder at the two women. Jolene stared at Paula, and she seemed to John nearly as taut as a bowstring; her face was anxious and strained. Virginia looked at John with a faint smile behind the tension she displayed.

John considered both Steve and Paula. "These children have some serious problems. She's not like an eight-year-old should be, and he's not as developed as he should be. How much pain did they suffer that even Jolene doesn't know about?" he thought.

"Paula?" Steve called, and all three adults jerked.

Paula remained immobile, staring at the wall.

"Paula," Steve called again. He turned his gaze to John. "I'm hungry."

John responded with a pat on his head. "Well then, maybe you'd better eat something. What would you like?"

Steve kicked his feet and smiled. "Pizza! Pizza always makes me feel good."

John smiled and turned his head again. Jolene and Virginia had not moved; they looked like statues.

He caught Jolene's attention. She scarcely nodded and sucked in her lips.

"Okay then, we'll get you a pizza. How about you, Paula?"

Paula cringed and turned her face toward the floor, but she neither turned nor answered.

John waited by the front door. "Come on with me, Steve; we'll eat out and bring some back for Paula."

Steve jumped down, ran to Paula, knelt before her, and pleaded his case. "Come on, Paula. Not mean. Not hurt."

"What do you know?" Paula shouted. She hit him and knocked him down. She jumped up, ran across the floor to Jolene, grabbed her, and started crying.

Jolene's pained face looked helpless as she hugged her daughter.

Paula buried her face in Jolene's chest and cried harder as Jolene rubbed her chin on her head.

"It's okay, baby. Go ahead and cry. It helps. It really does," Jolene whispered.

She raised her head and looked at John. "Go," she mouthed silently.

Steve stood with a sullen face and a gloomy mood. He walked slowly to where John stood, took his hand, and spoke gently.

"Paula. Not mean. Not hurt. Come on." He turned and left with John.

The door closed, and Paula snapped her head up. "Mom?"

Jolene wiped the tears away from the trembling girl's cheeks. "It's okay, Paula. Not every man is the same. He won't hurt you."

Paula shuddered and jumped from Jolene's lap and ran out the door.

She followed the men down to the sidewalk as she shouted for Steve. He turned, and she picked him up, moving him away from John and scolding him.

"You're crazy, Steve. I'll go with you. You can't go with anyone who seems nice. You don't go with people alone. You promised me."

Steve's lower lip trembled, and he looked near tears.

The action perplexed John. "What do you do now? This won't be very happy for anyone soon," he thought.

Paula put him down and took his hand. "Don't cry, Steve. I'm worried about you, and I don't want you to leave me alone because I need you around. Let's go now."

Steve's demeanor changed a little, and he moved along with her, behind John.

"Paula, he's not mean!"

"I heard you. We'll see. Let it go now."

In the car, she sat close to the door and kept Steve between her and John.

*

Jolene and Virginia knelt on the sofa and watched them through the living room window.

Jolene heaved a heavy sigh. "Phew, that's the first time she's cried. I often tried to make her cry, to show some emotion, but she wouldn't. Instead, she acted normally and said she didn't hurt. I guess she's been using Steve in some way. Maybe being around John will help."

Virginia watched John, handling himself diplomatically. "That's good."

"This is the first time she's been in this situation. Anyway, I've decided to call it quits for men in my bed. I don't want to torture her with stress until she breaks."

Virginia studied her thoughtfully. "I know what you mean, but she needs to learn that not all men are created with the same violent streak that George has."

"Maybe John will help with that."

Virginia laughed lightly. "Keep your cleavage to yourself, wench."

Jolene chuckled. "He's not looking at it."

"Bull. If he stays around too much longer today, I'll have to have his eyes surgically removed from your boobs."

Jolene laughed and swatted Virginia's hip. "Shut up, girl! I don't want him. He has you written all over him. So, tell me, how does he check out in bed?"

Virginia rolled her eyes. "I swear, Jolene! Do you ever wonder about anything besides sex?"

Jolene sighed. "Sorry. I keep forgetting you're still a virgin. That's a rare anomaly these days. Does he like it?"

Virginia shrugged. "He doesn't mind so far. I don't know about later. If we make it, I guess I'll know."

"You will, Virginia Rose. You're one strong woman." She turned and sat on the sofa. "You want me to cook a meal for him?"

Virginia breathed heavily and sat beside her. She stared intensely at her own hands, and her face twisted.

"What's wrong, Virginia? Come on, out with it."

"You can cook if you want to. This hurts me a lot, Jolene." She took the offered hand.

"Just say it, girl."

"I'm in trouble. I sort of got myself arrested and sentenced to jail. John was my lawyer, and he had several charges dropped and a plea bargain kept me out of jail. However, I still have a lot of fines to pay while I'm on probation."

Jolene shook her head. "Damn, Virginia Rose. What did you do?"

Virginia explained her situation.

"So, say it, honey. I won't snap out at you," Jolene said as she hugged her.

"I do okay on my own, and John isn't a burden, but I can't keep you here without you helping yourself, okay. I'm sorry. I look at you as family, because I'm alone in this world, and it makes me feel as if I've let you down. I don't want to ask for money from you, but I'm forced into it."

Jolene moved back and hit Virginia's shoulders. "You had better pull your head out, Virginia! I didn't expect you to ask, really. I figured I would have to fight you to get you to take it, so that makes me feel better. So just stop the fuss and let's get busy."

Virginia wiped her eyes and sat up. "We'll fix lunch for us. I don't know John too well, but I think he'll keep them occupied for a while. You can turn him on with your Cajun cooking some evening this coming week, okay?"

"You got it. I'll serve him Cajun boobs supreme." She dodged Virginia's right hook and ran for the kitchen.

*

John returned two hours later. Paula kept Steve between them, but she occasionally glanced at him and answered questions. She talked mainly through Steven with relay messages.

Virginia asked if he enjoyed the meal.

"That was the first time I ate at the Pizza Palace for nearly a year," John said. "I wasn't totally happy, but I enjoyed it."

"Where else did you go?" Jolene asked the children.

"Park," shouted Steve. "We kicked leaves. We chased birds."

John chuckled. "He certainly did."

"May we have a word alone?" John asked Virginia.

She flashed a coy smile at him, "Where?"

"Anywhere you like," he laughed.

She joined his laughter. "Excuse me, Jolene. The man of the house wishes an audience."

She took him to the kitchen.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, prepared for questions about Paula.

He rubbed the back of his neck and sat on a chair in front of her. "This is difficult to ask. However, I must ask it."

The grave looked worried her, and she touched his face with both of her hands. His cheeks were flushed and hot. "Hey, sweets, don't fret over whatever you want to ask. I'm not going to hurt you. Don't make it painful. Okay?"

"This might sound silly, but do you have any diaries, maybe left by your previous Virginia Roses? If you do, I would like to take them with me. I need to read them."

She frowned. "Need? Did you say need?"

He explained his dream. "I never saw the woman before, but her words kept running through my mind. I was extra kind to Paula, and I kept seeing her, standing on the beach instead of the woman. She told Steve once, 'You've got to be strong, Steve, like the ocean.' I would like to dig into your life and ancestry if you don't mind. I'd like to know you much better."

She smiled and moved her hands to his shoulders. "That's very sweet of you to ask. And I do have a few diaries somewhere in the attic but let me consider this a short time. I mean it will be like me letting you crawl around inside my head and check out my dirty laundry, you know?" She suddenly kissed him intently.

"Whoa, major smooch," laughed Jolene from the kitchen door.

Virginia jumped and broke the kiss. "Gosh, Jolene! Have you heard of knocking on doors?" She fanned her face.

"Did you ever hear of waiting until the kids go to bed?"

John hugged Virginia. "This is where I leave. I have a few depositions to review before Monday morning. I'll see you later."

"Come over on Monday evening, John. I'm cooking the meal that night. Do you like Cajun?"

"I do."

Virginia walked him to the door.

"Consider my request," he said and kissed her lightly.

"You got it bad, Virginia Rose," Jolene declared.

"I hope so," she sighed. "It would depress me to have this feeling yanked from under me at the altar."

CHAPTER SEVEN

July 1992

John forgot about the dream and about the diaries for a time. He dated Virginia and helped Jolene move into her new house. She told him it was the last time she would move, for she felt safe in Dover, Delaware and in the community where she rented the house. Paula overcame her fear of John and played with him and Steve at every opportunity. Jolene felt grateful for his patience. Virginia Rose adjusted herself to the empty house and John's frequent presence.

One Saturday, they had gone for a long walk, and she led him upstairs to her bedroom. They lay on the bed and slept.

In his dream state, John walked through the mud on a winding dirt road. For the twentieth time, he asked why, but all that returned was the eerie silence of loneliness filling him with pain and grief. Finally, he told himself that the whole thing was a cruel joke. He stopped beneath the arched entrance of a cemetery, sighed, walked through, and turned left on the small second path. He stopped and looked down at a grave, covered with new grass blades. He knelt and moved the dry, dead bouquets of flowers and read the name, VIRGINIA ROSE MERRIWEATHER. He took a deep breath and screamed, "NO!" The birds in the trees took flight chirping wildly. He fell across the grave and cried unceasingly until he had no more tears.

John woke with a start and put his free hand to his face. His eyes were moist, and he felt a real deep hurt inside him. Virginia's head rested against his shoulder, and he lay still and stared toward the ceiling as his breathing returned to normal.

"That couldn't have been this Virginia Rose in my arms," he thought. "I was inside another person. Someone married to a Virginia Rose in the past. Probably Nathan. Gosh, what a pain!"

He moved his gradually numbing arm and rolled over onto his right side. He felt and heard Virginia stirring in the bed. He looked at himself in the mirror over her dresser as he thought of the first dream nearly a year before and the one now. This one unsettled him greatly and he recalled their date at The Nuts and the wild conversation with Virginia. Her desire to live past thirty-seven, his promise to help her, and cautioned himself.

Then you'd better get your ass in gear, John. He nodded to his face in the mirror and gave himself a thumb up.

The mirror twisted as he watched and through the center, the woman he saw before on the sand dunes grew into shape and form. She looked at him with a pleading face, and dropped to her knees, her hands clasped.

"Be like the ocean, John! Don't do this. Not until it's time. Please? Do not bring her pain." She gave him a worried look and blew him a kiss. "Trust me. Please?"

She faded, and John saw his own worried face.

Beside him, Virginia Rose stirred, stretched, and patted him on his side. "John, are you asleep?"

"I'm awake now. That was an awesome nap. I feel like I slept for two centuries."

"I don't call you Rip van John for nothing," she joked. Then she sighed. "Do you know what I'd like to do, love?"

"No, I don't." He rolled over to face her. "Usually when you ask that question...." He stopped mid-sentence.

Virginia's blouse was unbuttoned completely, along with her bra clasp in the front. Her hands were under her pillow and her eyes were closed.

"Does the cat have your tongue? Do I have to tell you the answer?"

He moved to touch one of her uncovered breasts. He barely let his hand caress it when he pulled it away as if it would burn him.

"Be strong, John, like the ocean." The thought and the pleading face and clenched hands flashed through his mind.

"No, you don't have to give me the answer."

He moved her blouse aside and caught the cups of her bra and moved them back over her breasts.

Her eyebrows slid down toward her nose. Her face wrinkled, and her lips pushed out into a tight circle. She opened her eyes as he closed her blouse and started buttoning it.

"What's wrong? What are you doing, John?"

He sighed. "I'm doing what I should do. I'm doing that instead of what I want to do, whether I like it or not. Don't worry. It'll be okay."

His comment upset her, and she resorted to begging. "Come on, darling. It's okay. I know we'll be married someday, and I don't mind. Really. You can go ahead."

"Yes, I could, but I won't." He smiled and felt strange. "I rather got used to this waiting, chastity as you call it. It was your idea, and we'll wait until we're married."

"John? Love? Please?" she begged once more. "Are you okay?"

When she touched his face, it made him shiver. He chuckled and ran his hands through her hair. "Yes, my love, I really feel great and I'm doing this for us. I won't let you back down on your word. Just don't ever tell any of my friends or yours that I did this."

Virginia's shoulders sagged and she stared at the bed between her legs. "Wow! Maybe I've influenced you too much. I never thought you would stop it."

"Once we are married, I won't stop. Trust me." He kissed her and she relaxed.

She sighed, lay back, and stretched her muscles. "I was so ready," she complained one last time. "Are you sure?"

"How's your memory?" he asked.

"Just fine."

"What's your decision about me snooping through your dirty laundry? You've taken too long to answer."

"For a massage, I'll let you do anything you want. Fair enough? When it's delivered, I'll take you to the attic, and we'll get the diaries I do have."

"If I asked, would you marry me?"

"Of course. All I've been waiting for is the invitation."

"Thanks," he said, leaning down to kiss her.

"I suppose you want to choose the place and time?"

"Yes, I do. I want to find the place where Virginia One was married and recreate it as much as possible. I think we need to have a wonderful date soon. This is the preview."

She giggled and applauded him. "Okay, for three massages, I'll let you. This will shock Jolene."

"Yes, I'll bet it really will. She'll probably faint right on the floor, Thunk! Cajun boobs up, skinny butt down."

"You're terrible."

"You've taught me. I wasn't this way until I met you."

“You think her butt is skinny?”

“I was too busy watching yours. I never really noticed.”

“Bull.”

“I want to take you out, not on a quasi-date on Wednesday,” he said to her, kneading her back. “Then on Friday, we’ll have a real date. And on that one, we’ll make it official. I’ll propose in public and make you cry. Okay?”

“I can deal with that,” she said, watching his reflection in the mirror. “I really do love you. I’m glad I found you, even though it wasn’t under the best circumstances. However, it’s not a really bad time for a beginning.”

*

John met her on Wednesday when he finished with his last client and took her to a jewelry store in a mall, and together they chose an engagement ring and wedding rings.

“Can you act surprised when I pop the question?”

“I’m surprised now, honey,” she responded with a boisterous hug. “This has been a dream that leaves me breathless sometimes. I’m afraid to touch you, thinking you might turn to dust if I do. You know what I mean?”

“Yes, I do, but I’m not quite that old yet. I can wait for that for a few centuries.”

She spun in a circle and leaned against his chest. “So, can I. Where are you taking me on Friday?”

He put an arm around her and moved her toward the mall exit. “Oh, someplace fancy. I thought that a hot dog and a bowl of soup from the Dover News Stand would be great.”

She agreed and then stopped walking. “Wait, what did you say?”

He turned around, grinning like an innocent cat with feathers dropping from his mouth. “Romance comes from the heart, Virginia Rose. The place is only a medium for holding the two people together for a moment to enjoy it.”

She started softly and ended up laughing so hard she had to lean on him. “You’re too much,” she said and regained control. “You’re just so great. Okay, my love, I’ll let you be the guide. Where you go, I will follow and enjoy wherever you are.”

He took her outside the mall and stopped at the sidewalk across the driving lane from the parking lot. He looked to the sky and thought, “If I do this, she’s going to throw a fit. Well, I’ll do it anyway.”

He scooped her up in his arms and carried her across the street.

“Whoa! John! Put me down,” she begged and kicked her legs. “People are watching.”

“If you don’t hold still, I might drop you,” he said, making no move to release her.

“But people are watching us. Oh, gosh. Come on, put me down.”

He did not listen until he reached his car. Then he set her feet on the ground and released her. She hit him very softly and looked around, and in the fading light, he saw her blush.

“That man is staring,” she complained. “Why did you do that?”

John bowed. “Because I wished to be romantic and express my love for you, Miss Matthews. If anyone is staring, it’s because he feels guilty of not having the balls to do what I did. He can hide his love, keep it under a basket. I can’t. This love I have for you won’t be contained. Need I embarrass you again by asking you for a kiss?”

“Here?” “She asked and then silenced, turned her face upward and he caught her up, kissing her with her feet off the ground.

*

Friday John arrived and Virginia opened the door. She wore a blue and white checkered skirt and a light blue cotton tee shirt. He observed her sadly.

She looked at his usual dress when he left his office, suit pants, white shirt, and tie. He left his coat in the car.

He cleared his throat. "Sweetheart, this won't work. I can see your confusion, and I'm sorry. They won't let you inside, dressed like this."

"The Dover News has changed that greatly? Do they have a dress code? Since when?"

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. We're not going there. Trust me, they won't let you inside, and they don't have a drive through. I'll make myself comfortable while you change."

"Then where are we going?" She walked towards the stairs.

"We're going to The Thomas England House."

She did a double take. "Are you joking, or are you serious?"

"Dress like you did when you went to court, my love. When we walk in, I want every man to sigh and every woman to drop her wine glass from the shock of seeing a true Virginia Rose."

"Oh, my gosh! You got it!" she cried and ran up the stairs.

He walked around the living room and viewed pictures on the wall while he waited. There were two that attracted him. One was of a man standing with a woman holding a baby in her arms. They stood in front of a log house in a field of what looked like soy beans. The small plate underneath read "Virginia Rose 3 and Matthew Hastings." He felt attracted to the features of the woman painted on canvas and the rugged strength that showed through the sweat on the man's face.

The second was a painting of a tall ship, setting her sails and moving away from a dock. The plate held the words, "The Willow." His fingertips flowed lightly over the contour of the painted surface of the ship. "Someday," he sighed.

"How do I look?" Virginia called from the stairs.

He smiled and clapped when he turned. "Yes, love. That will do it."

She walked gracefully down the stairs, her hands working nervously.

"Did I take too long?" she asked when she reached the bottom stair and turned for his inspection. "If we're late, it's your fault. Be careful of my nails; they're still wet."

"You look fantastic. However, I came early, and I'm glad I did. That entrance was worth the time spent." He touched the string of pearls around her neck. "That's the right finishing touch."

She took his arm. "Then let's go, my darling. We mustn't keep the audience waiting."

*

The response did not happen quite as John wanted, but it satisfied him immensely. The conversation in the plush lounge ceased when they walked through, and Virginia Rose elicited more than a few hushed whistles. No wine glasses fell, but he noted several raised brows and quiet whispers of "Who's that? And where did she come from?" It boosted his ego, and Virginia Rose watched him with delight.

"You liked showing me off, didn't you?" she murmured after the hostess seated them.

"I adored it. That was a good entrance. Imagine what will happen when I carry you out."

Her eyes widened. "You wouldn't dare. If you do, the wedding's off."

He pushed his lips out and picked up the menu. "Whose wedding did you mean, darling?"

"Are you going to be this way after we're married?" she asked, picking up her menu.

"Where did you get the idea that we were going to be married?"

"Well, if you don't, I guess it will make for a very interesting life," she responded, unperturbed with his aloof attitude. "I hope you like sofas."

His muffled laughter allowed the conversations around them to start again.

They ordered, and John ordered a bottle of wine. Virginia Rose rolled her eyes and said nothing when the wine arrived, and the waitress filled her glass. Instead, she looked across the table at John, sighed, and flashed him a modest smile that thanked him silently. She drank with very delicate sips because she did not want to have an instant replay of the party that started her problems.

The prime rib and shrimp meal arrived, and they enjoyed themselves in a trance that excluded everyone else in the dining room. They both refused dessert, and the waitress cleared the table.

Virginia sat back in her chair contented, and said, "Thank you, John Bennington."

He barely nodded his head. He took out the ring container and placed it on the table in front of her.

She sat forward, smiling in anticipation and wondering what he was going to say.

"Virginia, despite the riches that the world may think I have; I'm a poor man. There is one thing that I lack, one thing that I desire to make myself feel complete. I long for and lust for a rare and delicate Virginia Rose. I was searching for you before I met you, and now that I have found you, I want you to be my wife, to grow with me. If you say yes, you will make me the richest man alive, for I will lack nothing with you at my side."

Her eyes glistened, and a few tears appeared and trickled down the side of her nose.

"Yes, John Bennington," she said as he opened the box and took out the ring. "I'll marry you, as many times as you want. Will a dozen be sufficient?"

She held out her trembling left hand for him to put the ring on her finger. "Did you have to make it so sweet that I cried?" she asked, using a napkin to dab the tears away.

"Yes, my darling. This is the start of a forever thing. It needs to be a good start."

She leaned across the table and kissed him.

Her cheeks reddened to a pale rose color when some of the dining patrons gave them a round of polite applause and forks tinkled glasses.

"Let's get out of here," she said. "I'm about to overload."

To her delight, he did not pick her up to carry her from the restaurant.

CHAPTER EIGHT

John took Virginia home, and he sat with her in his arms for quite a while, talking about what would happen in the future.

“Stay with me tonight, John.”

He moved back and refused.

“I can’t believe you, John. Do you know how I feel?”

“Yes, I do. I would have to be deprived of all five senses not to know. But I also know that you’ll not die from those feelings. I know it would be easy and welcome, but you started this, and I know I need to be strong. I don’t know why. I have that message running inside my mind and my dreams. I don’t want to hurt you. That’s why I’ll suffer a while longer. I’ve dreamed of what might happen if I don’t.”

She sat up and moved away a few inches. “What dreams?”

“Dreams I don’t remember, but I know they leave me feeling incredibly sad and depressed. I don’t like them. But I don’t mind the ones of the woman in the sand dunes. She brings encouragement and comfort, really. The other ones frighten me. I don’t want to feel that way about loving you. So, I’ll wait.”

She clasped her hands and rested them against the bottom of her chin.

She viewed him thoughtfully, considered the seemingly spiritual insight her mother possessed, and spoke silently to her.

“Mamma, I wish you were here right now. I wish you could explain the things he’s saying. I remember, no; I don’t remember enough of what you said regarding the power of dreams. I understand this is for me, but I don’t like it. I want to turn loose the feelings inside me. He wants to corral them. I guess I’ll hang with your advice and let him control me for a while.”

“Okay, dear. I’ll listen to you. I’ll try to control myself, although I would love to sleep with you.”

“That’s the spirit. Goodnight.” He kissed her and left her with her thoughts.

He went home, relaxed on his balcony, stared at the stars, and drifted to sleep, dreaming of being with Virginia Rose instead of alone in his empty bed.

John lay on a sand dune and watched the gulls fly and dart around the clouds in the sky. They screeched and dove, fighting each other for a scrap of food. She suddenly appeared at his feet, gazing at him. He felt a flash of fear and started to sit up, but he could not move his arms or legs. He panicked and felt his heart beating wildly in his chest.

“Do not fear me,” she said. “I will not hurt you as you wish to hurt me right now, John.”

“Who are you? Why are you doing this?”

“This is a tactic of fear from the evil that permeates the world. It wants to stop you,” she said. “You know me already, John. Tell me who I am.”

“No.”

“You’re doing very well, John. It’s remarkable. I wish other men cared for their women as you do, Virginia. If that one single act of love could grow inside of other men, there would be great peace in the world. Who am I?”

“Virginia Rose Merriweather,” he said, and the fear drained from him. “You’re the first one who died at thirty-seven. However, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“You’re doing well, growing strong, like the ocean. So, keep doing that.”

She turned away. “This is where I married Nathan. It was nothing to the world but a great place for a beginning.”

She left him alone, and he sat upright. He could not find her again.

Back in his bed, he sat up, watched the moon rise, and spoke to the heavens. “God, what’s going on with me? Is there something wrong with Virginia? Why all this urge to be strong? If it’s this important, will You help me to know what to do? Amen.”

*

Virginia Rose received no answers to John’s telephone for most of the evening on Friday and all day Saturday. She told herself she was not worried but could not convince herself. Finally, when her doorbell rang, she jerked the door open and stood shaking.

“John, where have you been?” she shouted. “Get in this house right now!”

He stepped inside, touching her face as he passed. “How are you, love? I didn’t mean to worry you. I thought by now you knew that I would always be around for you. This is to be a good and happy time for both of us.”

She disregarded his comment and unleashed a loud scolding. “You had me worried sick! How would you feel if I just left and didn’t say a word to you? That sucks!”

“I don’t want to hurt you. Please understand that I’m not trying to ignore you. I’m not the kind of man who spends my time in bars, playing the games that destroy relationships. There are no other women in my life. What I’m doing now is for us. Since I met you, I sometimes think about the future, the two of us together. I’ve spent most of today finding where the first Virginia Rose was married.”

“I’m sorry if my loving you caused such a disturbance in your life. Maybe it would have been better to let it pass and not let my love show,” she said.

“Please stop that, sweetheart. I’m delighted that I met you. Do you think that the wedding proposal was just for a show? If you do, you’re wrong. Instead, you’ve opened a side of me that is new and exciting. I’ve never felt as pleasant about myself or life as I do now. So please stop being sorry that you make me feel valued. Okay?”

She wished to continue the admonishment, but his words had a calming effect on her. “Are you serious? You often sound sad and confused and frightening.”

“Yes. Before you, I was nothing but a lawyer. Now I feel alive, thinking, ‘Hey, John, there’s something to this thing: you’re nothing until you love someone, and someone loves you.’ I’m glad it’s you. I really don’t think I could feel this way about someone else. I couldn’t respect another woman the way I do you.”

She went giddy while he talked. “Okay. I’ll not stop you from loving me. I don’t ever want you to do that. I’ll do what I can to be strong on my own.”

“You can’t do it that way, not by yourself, but through me.”

She relaxed and sat back on the sofa. “You’re really getting deep into the Virginia Roses. Watch yourself. You might start with the PMS thing. What a drag that will be. You won’t like it.”

He laughed at her expression. “You don’t need to worry about that, dear. You can do all that. It’s your dirty laundry that I want to discuss. I mean, three days for one pair of panties?”

She hit him. “Shut up. So, did you find the place?”

“Yes, I did. It was on Bower’s Beach, although it wasn’t called that before the war. It was Bowers Point.”

“That’s such a seedy little town. I find that hard to believe.” Her face scrunched at the words. “You want to get married there I suppose.”

He shrugged. “You got a better place?”

“Bower’s Beach? Yuck! Have you been there? The only thing they have that’s positive is the Heartbreak Hotel, named after Elvis’ song, which isn’t much to brag about.”

He kissed her. “Well, I admit it’s not the best place in the world. However, I only want to be married there. I don’t dream of a honeymoon in the Heartbreak Hotel or on the beach. I look at it as the best place for a beginning.”

“You want us to start on a beach in Delaware?”

He rubbed his neck and took one of her hands in both of his.

“Sweetheart, I once defended a doctor in a malpractice case. It involved a mother’s lawsuit because a brain operation went wrong, and she attributed it to the doctor’s negligence. One piece of evidence the doctor presented was a video about the brain and a surgery in progress. The patient in the suit had severe psychological problems after the procedure and said it was the doctor’s fault. The video explained that the patient must remain awake during a brain operation. If the patient is awake, total recall of any said word is a given fact. The patient said he was disabled because the doctor used language inconsistent with his beliefs. In addition, he claimed the doctor used insufficient anesthetic, and therefore the operation had left him homosexual.

“The video was gross, but it got the point across. The brain is a nasty-looking organ. I mean, I didn’t want to eat for a few days. However, consider that all thoughts and feelings originate from something that makes you want to start a permanent fast. The love I feel for you starts there in something that looks nasty if you see it.”

She held her face in her hands and shook with laughter. “Please stop, okay? Oh, gosh, stop,” she begged. “I get the point. Did you learn about the beach in the diaries?”

“No, the first three were very lazy in keeping diaries. Are you?”

She confirmed that. “How do you know she started there?”

“It’s hard to explain, love, but she told me the first one, Virginia Merriweather. I dream of her very often. She tells me things that I don’t understand. However, she’s so compelling that I must listen and act on her words.”

“That bothers me. If you get to know her, you’ll get to know me, also. You’ll know everything before I think it.”

“No. I won’t! You’re wrong there!”

“Why did you say that?”

“Because you’re not like the other Virginia Roses. You’re broken. That’s why I’m here. I’ll help you heal.”

A small gasp escaped her. “What do you mean by that? What the hell?”

He sighed and threw up his hands. “I’m sorry if I can’t answer all the questions you ask. I’m also learning.”

She lay across his lap and gazed up at his face. For the moment, she chose not to continue her questions. “If I let you tie me up, will you please sleep with me tonight? I haven’t seen you all week, and the weekend is nearly shot. I promise I won’t rape you; I won’t even think about it. Please? Just wake up with me tomorrow.”

He squeezed her cheeks inward and watched her mouth pucker out. Then, he laughed about how it made her face look funny and repeated it.

“Okay. Where are the ropes?”

They talked for nearly an hour in bed before growing silent.

She snuggled against him. “John, you don’t really think that do you?”

“What?” he mumbled, nearly asleep.

“I mean, three days without changing panties. I couldn’t stand to sleep with me.”

His laughter shook the bed. He put his arms around her and rubbed his face into her hair.

“Will you stop already? I don’t think that at all. If I did, I wouldn’t be here. I said it as a joke and nothing more. How you clean the house is how you care for your body. I’m sorry if the comment offended you. It was meant to be funny.”

“When I first started loving you, I thought I would know you and be sure of what I did and what you did. I was wrong. I feel like I’ve been flipped upside down and hung by my heels, fresh out of the womb. I’ll try not to let your behavior bother me and hold on to the love. You’re a trip and a half. I guess you’ll make my life interesting also.”

*

Virginia woke the following day to an empty bed. She stretched and rolled over onto her stomach. She hung her head over the side of the bed and looked at herself in the mirror.

“This isn’t how it was supposed to happen, Self,” she said.

“Got an excellent one, huh?” Self said.

“He’s decent, he’s kind, and he’s different.”

“He’s strange,” Self told her. “Wouldn’t surprise me to learn he was a homosexual trying to change.”

“Oh, shut up, will you? You’re so wrong; you’re not funny. Like he said, he respects me, and I’m the one who started it. If I hadn’t done that, we would be getting laid right now.”

“Really? What’s that?” Self giggled. “Oh, that’s what happens with floor tiles, right? They get laid, you don’t.”

The doorknob turned, and Virginia snapped across the bed and jerked the covers up to cover the heat she felt brand her face.

“Good morning, Virginia. Are you talking to yourself?”

“Yes,” she said from under the sheets. “How long have you been there?”

“I just got here. Why?”

She uncovered her eyes to peek at him. “I was just curious.”

He walked to the bed, sat on the edge, and placed the tray of food he carried beside the bed.

“Do you regularly talk to yourself?”

“Not always, just sometimes, and I answer myself too.”

He smiled at her worry. “I really didn’t hear what you said. So, you can uncover your red face and eat your breakfast.” He looked at his watch. “Afterward, we’ll get ready and go to church this morning.”

“Church? Are you serious?”

“Yes. Will we have to argue about that?”

She shook her head and dropped the sheets. “That was embarrassing. I guess I’ll have to break myself of that habit.”

“Don’t stop because of me.” He placed the tray across her legs.

“You’re bad.”

He watched her while she ate.

"This is great," she complimented him.

"Thanks."

"When do you let me know about the wedding? Like what day, month, and year?"

"We'll marry on October 1 this year. It will be cool enough then for us to make babies."

She wiped her mouth on a napkin. "You want to make one the first day?"

He chuckled and picked up the tray. "No. Time for you to get out of bed now."

The dishes were finished and put away when she joined John in the kitchen. She looked around and nodded in approval.

"I don't do windows," he said, hanging the dish towel across her shoulder. "Are you ready to go?"

"Which church are we visiting?" she asked, hanging the towel on the oven door handle.

"Holy Cross. Have you ever been there?"

She shook her head.

"Well, I don't know about the first three, but the two I read about so far were always familiar with church. Maybe that's some of the difference with you."

*

Once inside the church, she felt lost and followed what John did, knelt beside him, and folded her hands. She closed her eyes and prayed for John not to stop loving her and for him to become strong like he kept talking about in his dreams. She remained there for quite a time after the mass started.

John finally sat beside her, put his hands on her shoulders, and asked, "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm okay," she whispered. "Once I started, I couldn't stop. It felt good. Am I wrong?"

"No. Sorry I bothered you."

*

October 1, 1992, arrived suddenly for Virginia Rose. The day before, she complained to Jolene about not being single and not having a stag party.

"You can live without that," Jolene told her.

"I want this to be finished so I can start to live. This life of virgin is okay, but I'm ready for the change, you know."

"You mean to tell me that John hasn't had sex with you? Where do you think?"

The look on Virginia's face stopped her.

"Wow, girl! How did you manage that one?"

She pointed to herself. "Me? I started it to slow him down some, and then he wouldn't proceed." She shrugged. "I mean, I tried three or four times. And he flatly refused to let me back down from what I told him that first night."

Jolene was shocked. "Honey, you've got yourself a strong man there. Don't mess it up like you did during your crime spree."

"I hope not. That would hurt worse than paying the courts forever."

"How's that coming anyway?"

She gave a wry smile. "Slow but sure. Someday I'll be free of it all."

"Does John help you?"

“He said he wouldn’t. I don’t mind if he doesn’t because he didn’t do those things. Let’s change the subject.”

“So, you’re all set for the wedding?”

Talk of the wedding brightened Virginia’s mood. “You and the kids and the minister. That’s the wedding party. Oh, I mustn’t forget the gulls, the flies, the crab shells, and probably some curious Bowers Beach residents.”

Jolene chuckled. “Where’s the honeymoon?”

Virginia smiled wryly again and pointed toward the stairs. “I’m sort of trapped. Probation Mother said she couldn’t approve a two-week trip to Nassau and San Juan for criminals. So, that will have to be delayed. We’ll do the same things here. Am I bad, or what?”

“The only thing worse than you is me,” Jolene laughed. “You’ll do just fine. I think John is the best choice for you. I really do.”

*

The wedding party left their cars and walked across the sand. They attracted a few of the residents and some children. People fishing from piers and the beach stopped and watched the gathering.

Virginia wore the brown skirt and white blouse that John had bought for her, along with a red cardigan over the blouse. He wore black slacks, a white shirt, and a long dark-blue coat with shoulder straps and brass buttons rented from a costume store. It was as close as he could find to the one Nathan wore in his dreams.

Virginia felt he had made a good choice. She was happy that he showed so much interest in her background. She thought he fussed too much about the dress, but she chose not to argue and enjoyed herself.

The ceremony finished quickly, and John kissed her while the audience clapped and cheered. John, Virginia, and Jolene planned a barbecue on the dunes for the reception. Some of the residents asked to join in, and the couple agreed. They made a hasty trip home and contributed hot dogs, burgers, and steaks. The party lasted much longer than planned, and John showed Virginia where the first Rose and Nathan had lived. He showed her the well, now covered with a brick building and a pumping station.

Jolene was the last to leave them on the dunes and gave them a present.

Virginia opened the package, complaining. John kissed Jolene and thanked her.

“This will look nice on our bed,” he told her. “The first Rose made quite a few babies under her Double Wedding Ring Quilt.”

Virginia rolled her eyes and then giggled. “I can see where I’ll spend the first year.”

CHAPTER NINE

John and Virginia returned home exhausted. After a short time of hugging and kissing, John walked to the stairs. Virginia stretched out on the sofa with her hands under a pillow.

“Good night, John. Sleep well.”

He stopped near the top of the stairs.

“Virginia Rose, get your butt up here and in the bed.”

She grinned and mocked and complained. “Gosh! Will you make up your mind? You don’t want to sleep with me forever, and now you do, just because we’re married. Which will it be?”

“If you’re not here in two minutes or less, I’ll do it like the Troglodytes.”

“How’s that?” She moved to the bottom of the stairs.

“Just thump you with a stick and throw you across my shoulder.”

“Wow! I love a man who knows what he wants. I’ll see if I can keep myself from being thumped with a stick. I’ll avoid that over-the-shoulder bit too. I like to see where I’m going.”

She ducked under his arms at the top of the stairs and ran past him into the bedroom. When he opened the door, her brown skirt sailed through the air and landed on the floor by his feet.

Virginia dimmed the lights. “Take your seat, please. The preview is about to begin. No popcorn in the bed and no smoking unless you’re hot.”

She lay back on the bed, her feet twitching from side to side. “Is this what you want?”

John approached the bed and gazed at her. “You want a sock stuffed in your mouth?”

“Not when I last checked.”

“Then shut up for a while,” he said, covering it with a kiss.

*

Across the continent, in a maximum-security prison southwest of Denver, Colorado, George McNaulty sat in the warden’s office. He credited himself with patience and perseverance. Now he felt that the reward he lusted for would soon be his.

The warden spoke with a fatherly voice. “George, this is a good bit of news. Two days from now, I’m transferring you to a medium-security prison near Colorado Springs. You proved yourself to be a model prisoner, and your work for the chapel is an additional benefit for you. You don’t belong here, and we need your bed for hardened criminals. If you keep up the same work there, you might be out of the system within a year. I wish all the prisoners would devote themselves to changing their lives like you. Good luck, George.”

“Thank you, Warden. I know how I was, and I know how I am now. I even surprised myself.”

*

John and Virginia adjusted very quickly to their new life, and he returned to working at the office and his career. Paula began to visit them frequently and soon became nearly a permanent fixture. She and Virginia talked with each other, and she subsequently became more open and livelier.

“What do you two find to talk about?” John asked Virginia. “It seems that you’d have run dry by now.”

“She has a lot of problems, and healing takes time. It’s no major problem, you know. She’s using me as a therapist. I love helping her.”

“I know you do, and I can see what being here has done for her. However, this is, what, two straight weeks now. I guess it’s okay, but she’s still sleeping in our bed, and I’m in the basement.”

Virginia looked at him from the dim light of the kitchen. “John Bennington! Are you jealous of her? I can’t believe this.”

“I’m not jealous, darling. I still would like to sleep with you sometimes. It’s been two weeks since I last woke up with you. I’m not jealous. I miss you.”

Virginia stood behind his chair, hugged him, and rubbed her hands over his chest. She kissed the nape of his neck, and he cringed as always.

“Well, after she’s asleep tonight, I’ll visit you downstairs, my man.” She moved one hand and trailed a finger lightly along the back of his neck. “Will that be, okay? She’ll leave soon, and life will be back to you and me, babe.”

He nodded, cringing away from the finger again. “Stop that.”

“It’s fun playing with you. Humor me.”

“No.” He stood to stop her. “I’ve got to go to Wilmington today, so I must leave now. Morning traffic is a bear, and I’ll never make it if I wait too much longer. Also, judges don’t like you being late.”

*

True to her word, Virginia went downstairs to John’s den when Paula slept. She lay down on his day bed, sighed, and made herself comfortable.

“I have a deposition for you to read, lover. It’s etched on my skin, waiting for you.”

“Where do I start reading?” He sat beside her and played with her freshly shampooed hair.

“Just take clothes off until you find the first word and read it from there. You’re good at both tasks, really.”

John unfastened her blouse and started kissing her neck and chest. Finally, he removed her bra, tossed it aside, and ran his fingers across both breasts.

Virginia moaned and opened her eyes to view him. “This isn’t John,” she thought. “Who is it? He’s so different.”

“Lover, are you okay?” Chills ran up and down her back, and the great feelings unsettled her.

“I’m fine. What’s your problem?” He stood and turned the lights to dim.

“Nothing.” She gasped when his hands returned to her body. “Just your hands and lips seem different. It’s exciting, and I don’t mind at all.”

John waited until his sight adjusted to the dim light. He enjoyed the way her skin turned a milky white under the light from the windows.

He removed his shirt while he kissed one of her breasts, and he continued until they were both naked and her hands turned from chilly to warm against his skin. Finally, he ran his hands down her left leg, grasped her ankle, and pulled it upward.

“No! Don’t do that.”

“You don’t want me to do this?” He kissed her ankle and moved his lips lightly across the top of her foot.

“Yes, don’t do that!”

She sat up and put her hands on his back. "John."

"Then I guess you don't want me to do this either." He moved his lips upward toward her toes.

"Oh my gosh! Why are you doing this? Oh, my!"

"You have sexy feet, Virginia. I never noticed them before tonight."

She took a deep breath, fell back on the bed, and adjusted her position.

She wrapped her right leg around his waist and moved her heel up and down his chest. "This isn't John. This is incredible!" she thought.

John moved his tongue across her toes and closed his lips on her big toe.

Virginia squirmed on the bed behind him and sat up again. "Please stop! This is too much. I can't stand the intense reaction to that stimulation."

She ran her hands up his back to his neck, pulled her face close, and bit him. He released her foot. She lay back on the bed, put her hands under the pillow, and sighed.

"Where did you think of that?"

"I don't know. They looked sexy, and they were there. Don't worry, I'll do it again."

"I'll be the judge, counsel! Come on, you're late."

The sheets ripped under her hands a while later, and John heard her ankles and knees crack. He moved slightly.

She freed her fingers from the torn sheets, snapped them up, and grabbed him. "Don't move, John!" she told him, laying her head back on the pillow. "Just don't move."

"Are you okay?"

"It's ecstatic, erotic, earth destroying, something like that. I'm wonderful." She sighed and listened to her voice become disrupted by her wild heartbeat. "Why did you do that? Were you reading my mind or what?"

"Mind? I haven't finished reading your body yet. However, after reviewing the deposition, I think we have a case for your toes."

"You're so funny. That was incredible." She moved her legs and gingerly laid them down on the bed. "Is this the way Troglodytes, do it?"

"No, the women they have sex with are usually thumped out first."

The bones in her shoulders and upper back cracked when she sat up on the bed beside him.

"Wow! I never had a massage from the inside out. We'll have to try this again sometime."

Two weeks later, Jolene arrived with packed bags ready for Paula. "You look great, Jolene. Have you been playing?" Virginia asked her.

Jolene blushed. "Watch your mouth, child. On occasion, I do. Oh, by the way, is Judge McNaulty still bothering John?"

"Every chance he gets. He's rotten to the core."

Jolene stared at the floor, a contemplative look on her face. "Well, last week, I went out with a man from the office, and he took me to Kelly's, the place up north where they have the strippers and go-go girls. And Judge McNaulty was there that night. He was stuffing bills in the bikini bottom and kissing them. I remember you showing him to me once. He did a good job with his hair, but I know it was him. He sits on the bench and tries sex offenders, and they get light sentences. I wonder why?"

Virginia listened intently, and her mind shifted into high gear.

"I would wonder what could be done about that, wouldn't you?" Jolene asked.

“Yes, I wonder,” Virginia replied. A strange feeling began to assault her as if an external presence grasped her.

“Well, if you decide to go on the offensive, call Detective Sarah Johns at Troop Six by the Dover Mall. She’ll be glad to help you.”

“I hope he doesn’t try the case of the Philadelphia Pike rapist,” Virginia said. “When they catch him, he needs the death penalty. Like he needs to be shot by the police during his arrest attempt.”

“Are you ready, Paula?” Jolene called.

“Yes, Mom. I’ll be right down.”

“Thanks again for everything, Virginia. We’ll be in Baton Rouge for two weeks, and then we’ll be back. You guys have a Merry Christmas.”

*

Virginia got caught up in the festive mood of the holidays and forgot Judge McNaulty and her own problems until after the holiday season ended.

January 4th brought a new rape victim for Philadelphia Pike, but the rapist strangled the woman afterward. Virginia read the entire story, laid the paper aside, and remembered the information that Jolene had passed along.

She drummed her fingers on the table and decided. Instead of calling Sarah Johns, she contacted Rebecca Edison. She told her about Judge McNaulty and asked for any information available on his activities.

She visited with Rebecca and saw a GYN doctor for a pregnancy test. The next stop was the Probation Office to make a payment on her fines and check in with her probation officer. Her last commitment was with her counselor, and she returned home to become depressed with life.

Two weeks later, she grew more restless and detached. She avoided John and ignored his attempts at conversation. She knew what she had felt since the night she slept with John on his day bed. She was pregnant, and her emotions overwhelmed her and burdened her with depression.

John grew tired of her avoidance, and one day he caught her as she passed and sat her down roughly on the sofa.

“Sweetheart, this is getting ridiculous. I can’t help you unless you talk to me.”

She turned her face away. “It’s not your problem, John. Let it go.”

“What do you mean by that? You’re sitting around here moping like you lost the will to live. You look like you’ll break down in tears at any moment, and it’s not my problem? Excuse me, sweetheart, but I’m your husband, and your behavior affects me. I can’t love you and isolate you like this. Talk to me.”

She faced him. Her clasped hands shook. She opened her mouth to speak but could not find the words for a moment.

“This is so fucked up!” she blurted. “It was only four beers. What do they expect of people? Don’t let them do this to me! I know you said you wouldn’t help me with the fines, but don’t let them put me in a hospital. Please?”

He placed an arm across her shoulder, and she gripped him tightly as the tears broke.

“What’s this about, my love? I don’t care if you cry but tell me everything.”

"I'm not an alcoholic! My father was not an alcoholic, and I can't lie about that. Damn, John, I was there, and I drank four beers and the counselor at Kent County Counseling wants to have me committed to a hospital. She says I'm too screwed up to respond to counseling and therapy. She said that me in a hospital on medication would be the best place for people like me."

"She said that? Is it a quote?"

Virginia nodded. "She told me that she was going to have my probation officer arrest me, take me to court and have me admitted to the Berkwood Mental Hospital in New Castle County. She said I can't stop her, and I can't refuse the treatment there. I'm scared, John. I'm pregnant and I want to be happy about it, but I can't. Please help me!"

The tears increased.

"You're pregnant? When did that happen?"

"When you did the thing with my toes in the basement. The doctor confirmed it today."

"That's great! The other is not. What did the probation officer say?"

"I don't know. I haven't gone back to see her. I don't want to get arrested. I've done nothing wrong."

He hugged and consoled her. "My darling, I can't help you if you don't go back. If you don't go, she'll file a Violation of Probation Report and issue a warrant to have you arrested. Then they'll take you to court and the judge will be more receptive to what they recommend being done with you. You'll make things difficult for yourself if you don't go back to the probation office."

"I'm scared!"

John sighed with her. "I know, but you'll have to go back to the probation office. Who's your probation officer?"

"Jamie Benson."

"How about the counselor at Kent County Counseling?"

"She's Madeline Thatcher."

"When's your next reporting date for the probation officer?"

"It's next Monday."

"Go then and talk to her. I know the Probation Office. I don't know much about the counseling part, but I guess I'll learn. I won't let them lock you away in a hospital."

She sniffled and grabbed a tissue. "Thanks, honey. I'm sorry, but everything came on at once, and I just got choked up and couldn't talk."

"I know. You're really pregnant?"

"Yes. Are you happy?"

"Yes, I am, but the other things got in the way. I think it'll be great having a baby around."

She smiled and lay on the sofa, and he put a pillow under her head.

"You look like you could use some sleep."

"You got that right. I've been too nervous and scared to sleep well at night."

"Rest now, love. Let me think about what I can do for you."

After dumping so much stress, she slept quickly.

He wandered upstairs, lay on her side of the bed. The scent of her perfume and shampoo lingered on her pillow. He stared out the window for a time and turned away to sit down at her vanity.

“Virginia Rose One, I understand laws and the courtroom, but counselors I do not. I feel that I’m strong, but I don’t know what to do in this case.”

He gazed expectantly at the mirror. “This is stupid. This won’t work. I feel abandoned and helpless.” He rested his head in his hands and viewed the make-up containers.

“God’s love never abandons you, John,” Virginia Rose One’s soft voice reached him. “The love of the Virginia Roses will always be available to help you. Do you know how to Tango, John?”

He raised his eyes to see her face in the mirror.

“No, I can’t. I never learned how to dance.”

“Pity. How can you teach your Virginia Rose to dance if you cannot? Oh, well. I’ll lead. You follow. When I lead you where you need to be, you will learn. What you need to say will be given you when the moment arises. Can you trust the love and honesty of a Virginia Rose, John?”

He sighed. “Virginia One, I am uncertain of many things since you came into my dreams. I’ve followed you this far, and I won’t abandon the journey now. I just don’t want my Virginia Rose to keep suffering. This is wrong.”

Her face lit up with a smile. “Yes, it is.”

John felt chilled, and he shivered. He checked on Virginia; her face looked relaxed in peaceful sleep, so he left her alone and went to the basement. He sat down in his den and picked up his phone.

“Hello, Dave. Are you still into computer hacking and investigations for a fee?”

“Sure thing, my man, and itching for a task or case. What do you have in mind? Put me to work, buddy.”

“I want to talk with a few of the patients for Madeline Thatcher. She works for Kent County Counseling, and I’d prefer she didn’t know I, or you, are nosing around and digging up daisies just yet.”

“I see. Do you want a background on her too?”

“Yes.”

“How deep do I go? Do I just let you get her attention, or do I load you to hunt for bear?”

“That’s up to you. If it looks suspicious or devious to you, dig deep, Dave. Dig all the way to China if necessary. Right now, I couldn’t really give a fuck. So, prepare me for stepping on a feeble tabby cat or corralling a nuclear mushroom cloud, whichever is appropriate.”

He lay the phone down, chose diary of Virginia Rose 4 from his bookcase, and sat in his reclining chair.

I must write this dream in my journal. It frightens me but will not permit me to rest until I document it. I had a dream while I was awake yesterday. Some people I know say it is a vision. I just know it happened.

I sat on a hillside covered with many roses. Among them was one unique Virginia Rose. A Black Rose came from the bottom of the hill and crushed a Southern Rose and a Tiny Bud. The Black Rose destroyed the Virginia Rose, and stepped on her petals, grinding them into the dirt on the hillside. The Bud rose and attacked the Black Rose. The creature that claims the dead took the Southern Rose, the Black Rose, and the Bud away. It returned to the hillside, and a loud shout split the heavy silence.

All the roses around shuddered and screamed when the Virginia Rose was caught inside the jaws of the beast. The jaws carried her gently but steadily toward the abode of the dead. From the

west came a Blue Steel Rose with flashing petals. It raced through the sky and, without hesitation, shot inside the jaws of the death carrier. It forced the jaws to open and retrieved the dying Virginia Rose. It carried the bleeding rose back to the hillside and laid her crushed blossoms on the grass. The Blue Steel Rose beckoned a White Rose, so fiery that it burned blinding white in the daylight, overpowering the sun. It encompassed the Virginia Rose and restored it to life. The Virginia Rose left the hillside and went toward the west.

Once again, a Black Rose attacked her. This time, the Virginia Rose became the Blue Steel Rose, retrieved herself from the jaws of death, and left the Black Rose destroyed forever.

Later in the evening, the phone woke John from his nap in the chair. The phone stopped ringing, and he heard Virginia Rose talking in the dining room. He replaced the book on the shelf and strode up the stairs. He paused before the basement door, which was partially open, and listened a moment.

"I'm sorry, Rebecca, but I won't do it. I'll do no more forgeries. I won't do an Elvis Presley autograph or anything. The joke's over for me. If that's what you want, then you can keep the information. I'm sorry. No. I'm married and pregnant, and I'll do nothing to jeopardize that. I'll pay for it, but with cash, not illegal deeds. No. My crime spree has shot its wad, and it's pointless to keep asking. Decide! Okay. No. Could you bring it to where I work? No, I won't go there. Okay. I'll see you tomorrow at lunchtime. Yes, I'm weird and screwed up, and wacky, but that's okay. Bye."

She hung up the phone, sat at the table, closed her hands, and stared at them.

John waited for a moment, opened the door, and stepped into the dining room.

Virginia smiled. "Hello, husband. Thank you. I needed that."

He sat across the table from her. "That's no problem. Who was that on the phone?"

She shrugged. "Oh, that was Rebecca. I had asked her for some information, and she wanted payment in forgery. So, I told her to stuff it. She fussed a lot, but she finally settled for cash."

"What kind of information?"

"If you don't mind, we'll discuss that later. I'm not sure what I'm going to get. I'll get you involved when the time is right. I'm sure if what I get is correct, it could cause a huge disturbance in the Delaware Criminal Justice System, and I want no one to point the finger at my husband and try to lay blame. Relax, honey. I'll do nothing illegal."

"That's good to hear. Can we talk about the baby now?"

She clapped and shoved her hands into the air. "Yes, I'd like that."

CHAPTER TEN

The next evening John found Virginia in a contemplative mood. Dinner was prepared, and they discussed names for the coming baby and a nursery. She finally stopped when he wanted to set dating ages if it were a girl.

"Enough! That was a good one, but we've got a few years to talk about that, okay?"

"Fine, so we'll talk about your philosophical mood now. Am I right?"

"My mood bugs you, doesn't it?"

"It bothers me because it seems you're hiding something important."

"Well, let me clear the table, and while I do that, I want you to think about where we put the sketches. I mean, the ones I drew in the courtroom before we started dating."

He chose not to ask why and thought over her question. The move left many things in boxes in the attic. He searched the bookshelves and through one drawer in his filing cabinet. Finally, he found them in a folder and took the whole thing upstairs, laying them on the dining room table.

Virginia joined him shortly after she had the dishes soaking in the sink.

"Let's sort them and pull out every one that has Judge McNaulty in it, especially the one where he's a hanging judge. I want us clean on this."

"Sweetheart?"

"Just do it for now."

They separated the twelve into one stack, returned the rest to the folder, and laid it aside.

"This is good, love. I'm not the first to do it, but it's my first time." She sighed.

"I know I'm not like the other Roses, but I want to be. For them, this would be as easy as making tea. I don't know what happened to me, but I hope that a change will come soon. You're my husband and a part of me; what hurts you hurts me. There are things that I see that make my blood boil. And this time, I intend to do something about it, legally, but being your wife complicates that. I can see the fingers now. 'She's doing this for her husband, John Bennington. It's easy to see who wears the pants in that family. She's behind his career.'"

"What is this, please? My curiosity is about to explode."

She ripped the selected sketches to shreds.

"This is what it's about. Rebecca's information only added weight to what Jolene told me. She saw Judge Stanley McNaulty in Kelly's, stuffing bills into the bikini bottoms of the go-go girls and kissing them. Rebecca added the number of times he went there a month and his usual days. She also added his side excursions to an adult video store and use of call girls."

"Whew. Rebecca came up with all that?"

"Yes, she did. She was still trying for some forgery in return, but I had to disappoint her. I paid her \$50.00, and she called me a few nasty names, but she'll get over it."

"Anyway, I've told you about it and don't want you involved unless it's essential. I am doing it for you, but it helps when he's doing something wrong to deserve it. I hope the press and everyone else is so furious that they never make a connection. I don't have the strength of the former Virginia Roses. If I did, I'd do it and damn the consequences. Maybe someday I'll be that strong. I'd stand up in the courtroom with a loaded .45 and say, 'Do you hold my husband in Contempt of Court? I hold you in Contempt of the Virginia Roses.' Then I'd blow his little weasel nose through the back of his head."

He sat back in his chair, awed at her statement. "Hey, love. Remind me never too seriously upset you. Blow his weasel nose through his head. Wow!"

She laughed richly. “Yes, definitely. Solve many problems with a small amount of lead.

“I wanted to do this without you knowing about it, but you’re a lawyer, and you’ve got big ears. I’ll have to start working at being devious until my second set of Rose hormones kicks into action.”

“So long as you don’t get into trouble, my love. Go for it.”

*

The following day, Dave called John. “I’ve got what you want, buddy. For the price of a meal, you’ve got it.”

“Okay, Dave, you win. Let’s make it dinner on Saturday?”

“You got it.”

The meal was simple, but Dave praised it many times, and Virginia loved it. When they finished, Dave and John disappeared to the basement.

After thirty minutes of reviewing the information, John remarked, “This is amazing, Dave. How do you do this?”

Dave beamed. He was always proud of his work and ability to investigate a problem from many angles. “I have trade secrets, you know. I went a little extra when I found Virginia’s name on her active case list. I didn’t know how far you wanted to bring the hammer down, so I just hooked you up for a mother lode if you want it. I’d certainly like to see it happen. She sounds like The Bitch of the Universe Contest Winner.”

John sifted through a one-inch stack of papers again and occasionally glanced up at Dave on the other side of the desk, leaning against the edge.

“I chose those five because they’re off her caseload now. I verified the phone numbers as current. The last one is in the Berkwood West Mental Hospital in New Castle. I don’t know her status.”

“You did good, Dave,” John congratulated him.

“I try, John.”

“You like Cajun cooking?”

“Love it.”

“Next time Jolene comes to cook, I’ll give you two or three meals for this.”

*

Virginia called Detective Sarah Johns and left a message on her answering machine. She waited until it was time for work, then went. The answering machine was empty when she returned home, and it was empty. She frowned at herself in the bathroom mirror.

“What if she doesn’t believe you? What if she doesn’t deal with a sentenced criminal? That’s a possibility, Self.”

Self chipped in instantly and went for blood. “You got that right. Cops won’t listen to the gun moll. They’ll rush over with the cuffs and haul your butt away if they run your rap sheet. Far away. Can you say AWAY, Virginia? It’s easy. Haul your butt away.”

“Shut up! She was just too busy.”

“Yeah, right. She was busy preparing for your arrest.”

The phone rang, and she jumped. She shut the water off, grabbed a hand towel, and ran to the dining room phone.

"Hello, is this Virginia Rose?" a female voice asked.

"Yes, it is."

"I'm Sarah Johns. I got your message. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I have a problem, and you were recommended as the best contact. So, I wanted to make an appointment to see you."

"From the looks of your rap sheet, you got more than one problem. So, what's it about?"

Virginia frowned. "It's about the illegal activities of a member of the court system."

After a moment's silence, Sarah spoke. "You want to file a complaint against the judge who sentenced you?"

"No, I don't, Detective Johns! I want to sit down and talk to you about the illegal activities I discovered and let you do your job. It's not about Judge Wainwright. He was more than fair about the sentence he gave me. This is about someone else, and it needs to stop. I won't grovel to satisfy you! If that's what you want, then stuff it, Miss Johns! I'll classify you as prejudiced, like you classify me as an untrustworthy criminal. Furthermore, I will not lie if asked about it or you later. I'm paying for my foolishness; you can pay for yours. So, fuck you!"

She slammed the phone down.

Sarah Johns moved the receiver from her head and listened to the dial tone. "Well, I guess we touched a nerve there. Sorry about that."

She laid the receiver down and tried to ignore the call, but Virginia's retort stayed on her mind as she clicked her fingernails. Finally, she called her husband and told him she would arrive home late, a usual call, turned on the answering machine again and left the building. Fifteen minutes later, she rang the doorbell at Virginia's house.

Sarah waved and held out her ID when the door opened. "Hello, Virginia. I'm Sarah Johns. I didn't mean to upset you on the phone. Sometimes, criminals try to help themselves by getting to the police officers. If one could use me to get dirt on his judge or the DA, they would have an orgasm. I apologize to you, and if you're still interested, I'll listen to what you have to say."

Virginia looked her up and down. "I'll accept your apology. That was just a little rude, though. All you had to do was listen."

They sat at the dining room table, and Virginia told her all the information she had gathered.

Sarah remained silent throughout the presentation. She clicked her nails and took a deep breath when Virginia finished.

"That is a serious charge, and killer information, Virginia. Who was the source you used?"

Virginia twisted her mouth to the right. "Part of it came from my friend, Jolene Anderson. The rest came from Rebecca Edison if it's necessary."

Sarah nodded. "She's usually a competent source, even if she's shady. So, she said she could come up with a photo?"

Virginia nodded. "Yes, but she wants too much for it."

"What did she ask for?"

"She wanted a forgery job. I refused. I'd go there with a camera and try it myself before I'd help her on something like that."

"What was the forgery job for?"

"Is this necessary?"

Sarah smiled at her distress. "I'll protect you, Virginia. What I want is leverage for Rebecca when I ask for something. Also, if I can nail her on a charge, like possession of stolen Food Stamp ID Cards, I would do so without hesitation."

"Well, you probably can. When I finish that last probation payment, I want nothing else to do with the court system, so keep me out of it. I don't want you to nail me for anything."

Sarah nodded and patted her hand. "Don't worry. Now that I've talked to you and know your sincerity, I don't want to do that either. Keep yourself clean and out of trouble."

"I'll get back to you on this. If it checks out positive, it might cause fights and protests among a few Delaware natives. This McNulty family has been around for centuries and is heavy into the political, social, and economic structure. This single event could end up hurting more than one person."

Virginia walked her to the door and watched her walk away.

"Doesn't matter if they've been around for centuries, Miss Johns. If they're doing wrong, they can suffer for their sins and curses."

*

John rescheduled his appointments and visited the Kent County Counseling Center. He waited until Madeline Thatcher asked him into her office.

She was very curious about his visit.

"I'm interested in the Virginia Rose case. What's going on with her?" He sat across the desk from her.

"Virginia Rose? I take it; she's hired a lawyer to help her out. She belongs in a hospital, Mr. Bennington. She's unresponsive to treatment and refuses to see that her past and present behavior is highly anti-social and truly self-defeating. Unless she changes that, she cannot survive on the streets. She'll be back here in no time. The hospital environment with proper treatment would help her immensely. That's what I'm going to push for, Sir. She's a danger to herself and society."

John put one finger across his top lip and stared at Madeline for a few minutes. Then, "What was the purpose for involvement in her case, Madeline?"

"It was to correct the behavior that led her to drink alcohol under age."

"And what did you do? Did you do that?"

"No, she refuses to change."

"If she no longer drinks, as she hasn't, does that have no bearing on the case? Only if she changes her entire behavior?"

"Correct, Mr. Bennington," she smiled.

"You're so full of shit that I don't know how you stand yourself. In one moment, Virginia changed the behavior that led her to drink. She refused to go to parties with the people with her that day. She started living independently and refused to have any of her friends over to her house. She made the necessary changes and did it on her own."

"Mr. Bennington, I'm not on trial here," Madeline protested. His behavior suddenly alarmed her.

"The purpose of any counseling is to change the thing that made the person do something wrong. She did, but you won't accept it because she did it alone before you talked to her. You want to read something else altogether different into the case."

"You're wrong, and it's time for you to leave."

“Did you know she was a virgin when she married?”

Madeline stared crossly at him. “She couldn’t have been.”

“I can guarantee she was. I dated her for a year and never took her clothes off or had sex with her.”

“That has no bearing on the case. Go now.”

John stood swiftly, reached across the desk, grasped her blouse at her neck, and lifted her from the chair.

“It has every bearing on the case, you bloody wench! You slept with seven men before you married and with him for a year before making it legal. Virginia did not. Still, you want to force your bloody hypocritical Southern Baptist Religion down her throat. You’re a low-life piece o’ scum, Madeline Thatcher. You’ve had four abortions, and she’s had none. You try to cover up the smell, but it doesn’t work. Ye smells like the whores on the Barbados Docks! There’s more purity in the breath Virginia exhales than inside your sick and filthy mind!

“What you’ll be doing for my Virginia Rose is to leave her alone in her goodness. If not, I’ll take ye out to where Davey Jones’s locker waits for ye. Then, I’ll take ye on The Willow and keelhaul ye fat backside. Then, when the barnacles ha’ wore off some of ye tough hide, I’ll take you to the cannibals on Pago-Pago and trade ye fur something useful. They make a fine coconut rum, Madeline. I’ll trade ye for a gratifying load of rum.

“Your days of bloody hurtin’ folk have ended, Madeline, the Queen of Sin. I’m on to ye, and your days are short. A peg leg man could count ‘em on his one wooden stump.”

He pushed her back and released her. He stood away from the desk, feeling cold and staring at the hairs on his arms, standing on end. He focused on Madeline’s terrified face.

“Sorry about that, Madeline. The Attorney General has an extensive package for you, which I helped put together. You can do a lot of good, but you can do intense damage to your patients. Virginia Rose Bennington is one that you won’t damage. You won’t hurt her ever again! So, you relax and rest up for the hell on earth that’s coming after you like a speeding locomotive.”

John turned to see several other people who had gathered around her office. He stepped to the door, and the path cleared quickly. Inside his car, he looked at his watch. He had been in the building for twenty minutes but felt drained as if he had jogged for an hour.

“Phew! And wow! I can’t believe I did that. However, I feel damned great that I did.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

April 2, 1993

Paula and Steve sat on Steve's bed, facing each other.

"Steve, you have to stop this."

Steve stared at a spot on the wall behind her and said nothing.

"Why won't you listen to me?" she asked him. "Look, I want you to finish school. Please become as educated as possible. I know that what you did today, you thought, was right, but you can't continue doing that. You can't beat someone damaging enough to put them in the hospital. That makes you as evil as him."

Steve's face snapped back with a stern, unwavering gaze. "I WON'T let people hurt you! He was wrong, and I stopped him! You've suffered enough!"

She heaved a sad sigh. "Look, I know you love me and want to protect me, but you must stop. If you don't, they'll take you out of school, and then all you want to do will be wasted. I don't want that for you."

"I've spent much time with Virginia, and she's helped me. She's helped me see that I can't hide myself away from the world. What Dad did was terribly wrong, but not every man is the same as him. You know John's not that way, and you pushed us together, didn't you?"

He nodded with a faint smile. "He's not bad. He's good like a father should be."

"That's right," she told him. "Also, that boy you beat up was not that bad. He wasn't going to do that to me. He just said it for the benefit of his friends. Yes, he kissed me and said I was his, but it was all show. I'd never date him."

"I don't want to see you hurt anymore."

"Okay, don't hurt me by messing up your education. If Mom doesn't kill you and the School Board doesn't expel you, I want this to be the last time you do this. Promise?"

Eventually, Steve promised. She held and kissed his bruised hands. "We'll wait until Mom's relaxed, and then we'll give her the letter and tell her what happened."

"Maybe John will help," he offered.

She laughed and pinched his nose. "Of course, you wish that, Mr. Hope. Maybe he will."

They anticipated anger but were shocked at her tears.

"Oh gosh. When will the pain stop? Steve, you can't do this. You can't beat people up."

He hung his head. "I'm sorry, Mom. I don't want Paula to get hurt by bad people. She doesn't need that. She needs to heal. I didn't mean to do it. I just kept hitting him because he grabbed Paula. I hope you don't think I liked it."

"No, I don't think that, Steve." She pulled him down on her lap and hugged him. "I know why you did it, but you can't unless someone seriously hurts her. I want to see you finish school. Your father never did, and that wasn't a good thing to do."

"Will I be expelled?" He worried for the first time.

"I don't know, honey," Jolene said. "We'll have to face this like we have everything else, one thing at a time."

John and Virginia listened to Jolene, and when she finished talking, John agreed to go with them to the board hearing on whether to expel Steve for the remainder of the year.

"Do you think we'll win, John?" she asked.

"I really don't know about school boards, Jolene. We'll have to see how they feel. I know the papers have many articles about violence in schools. But where do you draw the line to stop it? Does the use of violence to stop violence carry any weight? I don't know. Keep your fingers crossed."

*

Jolene went to school with Steve, prepared for the worst. Paula stayed home, where she prayed, paced the floor, and watched out the windows.

The board assembled, and Jolene, Steve, Virginia, and John sat before them.

"This hearing is to determine the expulsion of Steven Anderson," the president said. "This is unusual to have a lawyer attend a hearing in elementary school."

"I am here as a friend and relative, Sir," said John.

"The issue here is that Steve Anderson beat Mark Wentzel so badly that he had to be taken to the hospital by ambulance. We still don't know if the parents will file a suit. We can find no reason for the behavior that led to the incident. The school principal here has recommended expulsion. The board has the task of fulfilling it or reversing it. That he did it is not an issue. Do you have any inputs, Mr. Bennington?"

"Yes, I do," he said.

To himself, he thought, "Virginia Rose One, I hope you are around me tonight. I'm lost on this one."

"Sir, Jolene, and I will not dispute that he did it. However, you have not heard from him or the youth in the hospital. Steve, Paula, and Jolene came from a family repeatedly beaten by the father and husband. The beatings were delivered solely to inflict pain and suffering in that environment. Twice the ex-father hit, restrained, and sexually abused his daughter. Steve was in the family then and tried to play the role of a father because the birth father would not.

"He has determined that it's his position in life to defend his sister, Paula, against the pain she suffered in the family. That is the reason he has fought twice in the past. However, he didn't restrain himself this time because the boy, Mark, grabbed Paula and kissed her against her will. In the past, physical contact and holding her have not happened. However, it did this time, and he perceived a more severe threat to Paula.

"I see this: you wish all violence to cease on school property, yet you cannot guarantee the protection of children like Paula. If Steve had not defended her, what would have happened if the threat were real? Mark would be here in his place, waiting for expulsion. And Paula would be in a hospital with yet another physical and mental scar. When you expect the students to defend themselves by never defending themselves, the leadership of schools and the country is in serious trouble.

"I see no need to remove his opportunity of education when Mark returns, and not a word will be said about his part in this. You can manacle and chain the students, but you must not stop the education process.

"Steve Anderson has written a letter of apology to the school, the school board, Mark Wentzel's parents, and Mark himself. For Mark, he admitted that he should not have done those things to Paula. Unfortunately, he could not write the letter but said it in his words. I oppose the harsh punishment the school principal wishes to condone."

He sat down, and the room was silent for a long time.

The board excused themselves and left the room for a while. Then, they returned and took their seats.

John read their faces like he did the jury and was pleased with what he saw on many of them.

“The Board has decided to expel Steve Anderson for one week instead of the remainder of the year. And in fairness to him, we will allow Paula to bring home assignments so that work will not be lost. The Board hopes this will be the last incident for the student.”

Jolene sighed, and tears appeared on her face. She hugged Steve and thanked John.

“That was a great speech, John. Are you sure you didn’t rehearse it?”

“Positive, my dear. That’s one of the many good things that happen when you marry a Virginia Rose.”

“Thank you for the words, Virginia One,” he thought.

“You’re welcome,” her voice rang inside his mind.

“John, you’re so full of it,” declared Virginia.

*

George McNaulty behaved so well that the prison transferred him to a Half-Way House for the endmost eight months of his sentence. He continued his chapel work and was released five months earlier on probation. He entered his probation period in Fountain, Colorado and obtained a job through the Department of Labor. At first, he lived in a shelter, but eventually met and moved in with a divorced waitress from a steak house and hotel. He soon asked for and received a job from the hotel, and he began to make plans for a move up the chain. He worked his way into a Baptist church and became a lay minister within six months.

“Life is good when you see the light,” he told his girlfriend, Sheila. “When I get into the management side, we’ll get married. Would you marry me if I asked you?”

Sheila agreed happily. “When you’re ready, George. I feel lucky that I ever found you.”

*

Paula gently opened her door, lay in bed, and watched the floor at the end of the hallway where the lights shone under Jolene’s door. Soon the lights went out, and she checked the clock. When fifteen minutes passed, she slipped from the bed, went to Steve’s room, and woke him.

“Come with me,” she whispered.

She led him downstairs and to the basement. She groped across the basement and found the light switch in the family room. She turned the lights on and sat down on the sofa.

“How’d it go? I’ve been dying to know.”

“I got the axe for one week. The teachers will give you my homework assignments and I’ll be able to stay after school to make up the missed quizzes and tests.”

“What a relief that is. It’s great! That was close. Can we talk about something else?”

He nodded and sat back on the sofa.

“Do you remember the first time?” she asked, watching his face carefully.

He nodded.

“Do you remember what we did afterward, when we were alone, waiting for Mother to come home?”

“I remember.” His voice was steady, but his face concerned. “Why?”

“I want to do it again, but this time, I want to make it different.”

“We said it was forever,” he complained.

“The Bible said that too, Steve. The Old Testament was forever, but when Jesus was born, the old one was changed to something new. If God can change the testimony, then we can change the agreement.”

She looked at him again, pleading silently with her facial expressions.

“Do you still have it around?”

“Sure,” he grinned. He slipped from the sofa and ran across the basement, moved a picture on the wall and took down a plastic bag. He hurried back to the couch and handed the bag to Paula.

“The Sacred Pin,” he whispered.

“You got it.” She opened the bag and took the extra-long straight pin and held it against her right thumb. She punctured the skin and squeezed her thumb until she got a bead of red blood. She handed the pin to Steve.

He did the same and turned, facing her, holding the fingers of her right hand in his, pressing the thumb to hers.

“Tonight, we change the agreement to this. I want you to stop trying to be my father and guardian angel. Instead, I want you to be my friend and normal brother. We’ve both been forced into this position and deprived of our childhood. We need to change that so we can grow up. Do you agree?”

He turned his face away and considered the request. “Will you still come to me for help when you need it?”

“Of course, I’ll still do that. Your love has been very important to me. I think you know that. I would have lost myself long ago if not for your strength to hold me together. I’ve got to change that now. Come on, agree.”

“I agree to stop being your father. Can we use John?”

“Oh, yes! By all means. He’s very kind. It’s nice to be touched by a man who doesn’t want to hurt you. It feels good.”

“I agree with all you said. Furthermore, I won’t fight any more boys for you unless you ask me to.”

“Grand! Then all is well, and all are agreed.” She released his hand, hugged him, and kissed his cheek.

“Thank you. You’re the greatest brother. I couldn’t ask for better. Come on, let’s go to bed.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“That was a close one, John,” said Virginia. “That family has a lot of problems. I hope they’ll have peace someday.”

“What do you think of Paula?”

“She’ll be okay someday. She talked a great deal with me and is much stronger than she looks. I do believe she’ll be a good mother.”

“How are your probation visits now?” he asked, changing the subject.

“They’re fine now, darling. Thank you again. I hear Madeline’s case is coming up against the Grand Jury soon. I feel sorry for her in a way.”

“I don’t. She needs counseling, and the people who keep re-certifying her should have done that long ago. I imagine they will get roasted a little too.”

“Well, it’s a relief to talk to someone who understands. That’s why I’m finished with that part of my probation.”

“What about you and the Hanging Judge?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Sarah Johns jumped into it with all my information, but she’s silent. I’ve called her twice, but she hasn’t answered me yet. Maybe she will get back to me someday.”

The following day, Sarah Johns visited Virginia Rose.

“My dear, you’ve opened and enraged a hornet’s nest. What you said was true, but only a pinprick. It goes far deeper than you thought. You can read about the details later, but when McNaulty’s arrested on the charges of solicitation, pornography, rape, and sodomy, I’ll be willing to bet that the long string of rapes and murders along the Philadelphia Pike will cease. The State boys will also arrest him as soon as the warrant is ready for the Federal Attorney General. You did good, Virginia Rose.”

The information stunned Virginia. “Wow! I never made that connection. Are you sure?”

“Nearly, and close enough. His home is within six miles of the rapes, and one woman gave a pretty good description of her attacker. But, of course, he doesn’t know that yet. It’s sad; it really is. However, I guess that sometimes even good families go wrong.”

“How’s Rebecca?” asked Virginia.

“Hovering between pissed and extremely pissed.” Sarah offered a grin at that description. “She was shocked when I entered with a search warrant and confiscated the stolen cards. I did it after I got the photos of Judge McNaulty. She never mentioned you once. How did you know?”

“I read the papers about the theft, and she desperately wanted my assistance. Then I just put the two together.”

“Maybe you should be a detective,” Sarah said.

“No thanks. You can have all that. I’ll just be what I am, a Virginia Rose, wife, and soon, mother. Thanks for letting me know.”

Sarah left, and Virginia went to the basement to find John sleeping on the daybed. She stretched out beside him, snuggled against him, and went to sleep.

John experienced another vivid dream.

Nathan entered the courtroom, not as a captain or a free man, but as a prisoner. His ankles and wrists were bound with the shackles and handcuffs linked together with chains. The courtroom fell silent, and the judge rapped his gavel.

"The courts have found you guilty on all the charges, Nathan Merriweather. Do you have anything to say before the sentence is pronounced?"

Nathan stood, feeling trapped and empty of spirit for a moment. Then, slowly he raised his hands, and the chains rattled as he pointed both hands toward the judge.

"Today, you believe you have solved your problems, Judge McNaulty. But I swear to you before God, and everyone present that this is the start of yours. You may remove me, but you will not remove the blight of the evil that emanates from your bench and the rest of your deranged family. I swear to you that your name and family will die in disgrace, sons killing fathers, husbands killing wives, and wives killing husbands, until not one McNaulty male is left living upon the earth. You will not escape the bloody punishment for killing innocent men for your crimes! You are less in this world than the last bloody bucket of honey dipper's slop."

The courtroom erupted in shouts and angry cries, and some people tried to jump over the small fence of the court and strike Nathan. The judge rapped his gavel until the handle cracked. Then, when the bailiffs had restored silence, he spoke.

"Nathan Merriweather, the court has found you guilty of rape and murder. You will be removed to jail, and on July 1st, you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead. May God have mercy on your soul. This court is adjourned."

The scene shifted, and he now stood inside a small bare cell. Three of his children, Matthew, Jacob, and Virginia Rose Two, stood outside the bars.

"This isn't right, Father," Virginia cried. "You're innocent. How can this happen?"

"Silence, Virginia," Nathan said. "Stop the tears until I have gone. Now!"

Virginia sucked in both lips and clenched her fists with her face lowered. Then, finally, she stopped the sobs that shook her. "Yes, Father," she replied, not looking at him.

He reached through the bars and raised her face. "Multiply and be fruitful, Virginia. Through your daughters, your mother's name will remain alive long after the bloody McNaultys have deceased. Teach your daughters and instruct them to teach their daughters. Your mother's reputation has been tarnished by heathens and demon worshipers. Let you and all your descendants restore it. Teach them chastity, honesty, purity, love, kindness, charity, and steadfastness. Through you, the curse I gave will be finished someday.

"Go now, my darling Virginia. Do not remain here. Remember me as you knew me."

The tears started on his face. "Take her home Matthew," he told his oldest son. "Watch over her."

He held both hands out, and both sons grabbed them for a moment, and said good-bye.

Matthew took Virginia's shoulders and turned her around. He gripped her tightly and carried her screaming from the jail.

John woke with a loud scream, grabbed his throat, and his left hand hit Virginia and knocked her from the bed. He jumped across her and stumbled against the wall, clutched at his shirt, and ripped the buttons as he tore it off and threw it across the room. He took deep, ragged breaths as if each would be the last. Eventually, he sat shaking and calmed down, rubbing his neck with both hands.

"They hanged him! They hanged him. Oh, damn them! How could they do that?"

He smacked the wall with his fists.

John calmed quickly, looked toward the daybed, and saw Virginia sitting on the floor with one arm resting on the mattress and the other holding her stomach. He shook his head, and the chill left him.

“Honey? Are you okay?” He moved toward her on his knees.

Virginia moved back toward the head of the bed, her face pale and frightened, with both hands raised in defense.

“Don’t touch me! “Don’t touch me! What is wrong with you, John?”

He stopped. “You fell from the bed. Are you okay? I’m not going to hurt you.”

She took a deep breath. “I’ll be okay. What happened? You scared the shit out of me!”

“I just dreamed about Nathan Merriweather’s trial. He was the husband of the first Virginia Rose. Then I watched him say goodbye to his three children and watched Virginia Rose Two crying and screaming. Then they hanged him. What a horrible feeling.”

She covered her face with her hands. “I think you’d better stop reading the diaries for a while. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe they’re the reason you’re having these dreams. There are marks on your neck. Maybe you need to stop with the Virginia Rose history. You’re starting to frighten me.”

He shook his head. “Sorry, my darling, but I can’t stop. The dreams started before we married. They have something important to do with you and stopping a curse on the McNaulty family. I never thought about dreams or anything like this before I met you, but I can’t stop now. I want you to stay alive, honey. I want you to see your grandchildren and have them sit on your lap. I’m frightened of what might happen if I stop this now.”

“Then please calm down. Your love has become very important to me. I sometimes feel that it keeps me alive and out of trouble while growing up. Don’t flip out on me, please?”

“Are you really, okay?” he asked again. “I don’t want anything to happen to the baby or you.”

She smiled and reached out a hand. “Help me up. We’ll go upstairs for a while. We’ll have to do something about those marks on your neck, and I’ll use the bathroom for the hundredth time today. The next baby is yours from conception to delivery.”

He followed her upstairs, with his hands on her waist, and went into the kitchen to wait. Soon she called him from the bathroom, and he looked at the bright red marks on both sides of his neck in the mirror. She took a medication tube from the cabinet and rubbed some on the spots. He winced from the touch but enjoyed the cessation of pain.

“I didn’t know that things like that could happen in dreams.”

“I never heard of it either. However, I believe it now. How do you know that Nathan Merriweather was the first one’s husband? The diaries that I did read didn’t mention that.”

“That’s true. I don’t know how I know. I just do. Someone is pouring the information into me, and I’m supposed to piece it together to solve a puzzle. Like the first Virginia Rose, for instance. I can sometimes talk to her, and if there’s a mirror around, I can see her image.”

“Was she beautiful?”

“That’s a pale adjective. Breathtaking and gorgeous is better. And she’s so full of love, it’s amazing. She gives me a lot of guidance and help.”

She frowned. “Give me one for instance.”

“Remember the first time we slept in the bed together? On that Saturday we were both exhausted from walking? Well, I faced the dresser mirror. I couldn’t see you behind me, but I

could feel you moving. She appeared in the mirror, pleading not to do this until the time was right. I had no idea what you were doing, but she did.”

She sighed. “You’d better be careful, love.” She leaned her head against his. “I want you alive, well and sane for the grandchildren. I don’t want a husband who talks to ghosts in mirrors.”

He laughed. “She also told me what to say to the School Board to help Steve. But don’t worry sweets. She’s giving me enough information to write a book about the Virginia Roses someday. Wouldn’t that be great? I’ll start with you and work back to the first.”

She joined the laughter. “Okay. I thank God that I found you and that you wanted to stay around.”

*

“I thank God that I found you, George McNaulty,” Sheila sighed and kissed him until she thought she might faint. “You’re a thousand times better than the one who married me and left me crying with a baby to raise on my own. I should have waited for you.”

George ran his hands over her smooth naked skin, held her close and stared at the ceiling. “Well, maybe I can make up for all the nights that you cried alone, Sheila. I want to do that. I don’t want to see tears in your eyes, just the moonlight reflecting the loving side of you.”

She rubbed her head against his chest. “Honey, you say the sweetest things. Two more months and I’ll be the happiest woman alive when I become your wife. I love you sincerely.”

She kissed him again, pressed her body next to his and draped her arms and legs across him. She shivered as his hands started sliding around her thighs and up across her stomach. She fumbled with her free hand and shut off the lights.

The Lieutenant Governor of Delaware, Mark Goodman, prepared a press release before Judge Stanley McNaulty was arrested. He sat in the Governor’s Office with several depressed men.

Stunned was a lame term for Judge Wainwright and the gathering in the Governor’s mansion office.

“How could this happen? I played golf with the man. I played chess with him. Ate meals with him. We went to law school together. His first case was prosecuting a rapist for the DA’s office in Philadelphia. It makes no sense.”

“It happened because he’s human, and he didn’t control himself,” said the Governor. “That’s one thing that no one is taught in school. It should be taught in the home by parents and enforced by them, even after the child marries. Self-control, Jack. He didn’t have enough. I just hope this doesn’t explode into a purification or culling campaign.”

“Heaven forbid,” Judge Carter chimed in. “That’s something the state doesn’t need. The citizens are constantly in an uproar over the little things, they’ll form a vigilante committee for something this big, and it will end up out of control.”

“Who started the investigation anyway? The DA dropped the disaster on me, and I was too shocked to ask particulars,” asked the Governor.

“A Detective Sarah Johns from Dover State Police,” said Goodman.

“How could she come up with the information to start an investigation? There must be more to it than that,” the Governor wondered. “This is necessary, I guess, but if anyone can do this on a whim, we’re all in trouble.”

The phone on his desk rang and everyone jumped.

“This is it, Gentlemen,” the Governor said, and picked up the receiver.

“Yes, I’m aware of Judge Stanley McNaulty being arrested. Yes, we will hold a press conference at 12:30 at the Capital Pressroom. No, I’ll make no statements until then. Thank you and relay this to the rest of the reporters. We will give no statements until the press conference.”

He laid the receiver down slowly. “Okay Mr. Goodman. Go do your thing.”

The papers and the radio exploded with the information on the arrest. Several public figures expressed outrage at the events and some portrayed shock. Virginia read the papers and kept her fingers crossed. Everything went well until she read one article written by a columnist named Ralph Watson. In his weekly column, he suggested the investigation was the result of revenge or a conspiracy. He suspected that the Police and FBI overreacted to the get-even mentality and self-righteousness of do-gooders who considered themselves above the law.

“Oh, my gosh,” Virginia said.

“What is it?”

She folded the paper and handed it across the table to John. “This is wrong. This little dork, Watson, is going to get someone killed someday.”

“You look like a do-gooder above the law, my pregnant darling.”

She had to laugh. “Oh, sit on it! You know what I mean?”

“Yes, he has a loose tongue and pen. He should think about some of the things he writes and consider the results before he puts it on paper. You worried about this?”

“A little bit. Back in the history of the Virginia Roses, they didn’t have to deal with the instant reporting of the press. They could work easier and with greater efficiency.”

“Keep your fingers crossed.”

“Well, in the worst case, I’ll have to visit him and slap him silly. But, no, I’ll have to do it gently with words. I don’t want to get any extra fines for assault, even if it would make me feel great.”

He kissed her goodbye. “See you later, jailbird.”

It took two days for Virginia’s and John’s names to appear in the paper with John’s contempt of court and Virginia’s sentencing and probation.

Virginia Rose was calm until she had a day off, and then she visited Ralph. She waited in the hallway for nearly an hour before he came to get her. He smiled and offered his hand, which she refused. She followed him to his office and waited until he closed the door before she spoke.

“Did you notice that Mr. Watson?” she asked before he sat down.

“Notice what?”

“That I chose not to discuss in public what I will now?”

“Doesn’t matter to me. What can I do for you, Mrs. Bennington?”

“You can tell me why you’re so proud of writing this column about me and the other do-gooders?”

“The public needs to know why things happen. You know that already.”

“The public needs to know that the only reason for the investigation was because of my anger over John being jailed. I thought that you were an intelligent columnist. I guess I need to

rethink that. You really don't care about anything except seeing your name in the paper and collecting a paycheck."

"Cut the crap, Mrs. Bennington. If you had kept your mouth shut, the court system would still have a very learned judge sitting on the bench. Instead, you're pushing for a political position for your husband."

"If that's the case, why didn't I come to you first? Why not put the whole affair in the paper and then let the police end up with a completely clean affair that he could disavow until he was ready to do it again? That would have been the political method. I'm not into politics. I'm into people paying for their crimes, just as I am. I didn't go to you first because I'm not into twisting the truth. I'm into letting the truth cut to the bone."

He sat upright, leaned forward, and scowled at her. "Do you expect me to believe that shit?" he asked.

"Put it in the paper next week and let the public decide if I'm lying, sir! Write it word for word and change nothing. Let the readers respond."

"You're crazy."

"Wrong! What I am is considerate of the feelings and positions of people before I open my mouth. The judge is on the bench and supposedly upholding the principal that you're innocent until proven guilty. I'd be a hypocrite if I didn't handle it the same way. I gave the information to the police. They did the investigation and they found much more than I ever dreamed possible. That's the proper way of handling the situation! I'm not rude and make a claim that can't be proven, so it will do damage instead of displaying the truth you tout. You've hurt John already for there's no way to prove why I did it. I guess you're proud, huh? How would you like the same done to you?"

He sat silently and studied her.

"Someday, if you don't control yourself, you'll become responsible for a person's death. You'll sit here and get paid, but someone will die because of what you write.

"I don't care to discuss any more of this because you're too dense and insensitive. However, think of this, how would you feel right now if your wife or sister or daughter were one of the women raped and strangled? Would you still condemn me for doing something that's right and stopping him? Maybe you need to check the conviction rate and sentencing pattern of Judge McNaulty in all his sex offense cases. Compare them to the other judges. The figures just might shut your too free tongue, sir.

"You have a promising career, but you need to think sometimes before you put your pen to paper with something that will distract from the truth. You need to discipline yourself!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

August 25, 1994

Virginia giggled at John's anxiety and restless fidgeting. "Really, I'm okay, John. Look: actually, billions of women have delivered babies, and it's no problem."

John stood beside her, and his hands twitched. "I know that. I just don't want anything to go wrong. That's all."

She laughed again. "Okay, but just go away for a while. Go play with Jolene's Cajun boobs or something. Just give me a moment's solitude and rest, please."

She controlled her laughter after he left and picked up the picture of her mother. "Will he make it through this pregnancy, Mamma? I swear. He's going to keel over with a heart attack before contractions start. I miss you right now, Mamma. I'd like you to be here to hold me for a while like you used to do." She sighed and then giggled again.

"You could also explain to John that it would not kill me if my water broke while it was winter, and we had the electric blanket turned on. That was a good one, Mamma. I couldn't help laughing."

She laid the photo on her chest, closed her eyes, and drifted off to sleep. John woke her three hours later.

"Do you want some dinner?" he asked.

"Are you cooking? I don't want much. I don't have much room anymore. If you can handle fixing a light salad, I'll be down in a few moments. Thanks for the nap. I needed that."

She joined him at the table fifteen minutes later. He had the paper folded to Mark Watson's column.

"You'll enjoy this, my sweet darling."

Today the trial of Judge Stanley McNaulty, Superior Court Judge for 19 years, ended. He was convicted on 20 counts of Sexual Assault and 4 counts of 3rd Degree Murder. In addition to the original charges, he also received convictions on Interstate Pornography Trafficking and Contributing to the Delinquency of Minors in sex related matters.

"Before the trial, this reporter made some harsh statements about Mrs. Virginia Rose Bennington and why she initiated the investigation. She confronted me about the comments and after months of deliberation and following the trial so closely, I wish to make a public apology for the unfounded, and unkind remarks I made in reference to her. She has performed an invaluable public service for handling the affair the correct way. I'm sorry, Virginia Rose Bennington. I was wrong and I accept your admonishment."

"Alright!" she shouted, holding a clenched fist over her head. "This is great. I love it."

"You got it. I'm proud of you."

"You should be. This is the way a Virginia Rose would do it. Maybe I'm getting there, huh?"

"Definitely."

"Whoa," she gasped. She grabbed the table's edge as her face twisted in pain and her right hand gripped her stomach.

"What? What is it?"

"Whew. I think that was the first contraction. Watch the clock and let me know the time if I have another one."

"Will you know if you have another one?"

She laughed. "I think I'll know. Are you sure you want another one? This one is so rough on you."

"That's very funny! See me laughing?" He turned his chair around and put one hand on her stomach while he watched the clock.

"You want to go back to bed while we wait?"

"No, just talk to me. Tell me something of this Nathan fellow you are when you dream."

He held one of her hands. "Are you serious?"

"For sure." She wiped the hair from her forehead.

"Well, he was a captain of a tall ship. In fact, it was The Willow that we have in the living room. Then he lost his command and went downhill from there. It happened one night off the coast of Morocco, during a storm.

"The way it looked; it was a hurricane. At times, The Willow came entirely out of the water and would smack down on the waves. I couldn't stand up when that happened. The sailors went out of control. They went below decks or were tossed overboard when the waves hit the ship. There was no way to get them to work the sails, and it wouldn't have helped if they did. Then, the main mast cracked and fell straight toward him. He slipped and tumbled twice, trying to get out of its way. He nearly made it. He tried, but it wasn't enough. The broken end hit him when the sail end smashed into the upper cabins and tossed him into the ocean like he was nothing.

"I remember the terror when he was flying. He watched his life pass before his eyes. He prayed and cried and then hit the water on his back. He went down, a long way down. What little air, he had in his lungs was not enough. They felt like they were on fire before his numb body finally rose to the surface. He breathed in huge lungs full of air and floated for a long time, watching his ship flounder, and suffering because he could do nothing.

"Eventually the main mast shifted during one of the Willow's rises into the air. The broken end hung over the edge, and the sail end wedged between the cabin and another mast. He swam the best he could and nearly an hour later, he reached the mast and clung to it until he rested. Finally, he pulled himself up to the mast and back onto the ship.

"The storm abated for a time, and he decided to turn the damaged vessel toward the coast and let the waves put it aground. He finally got three men from below, and they turned the rudder in the right direction and tied it. The ship came around slowly, and then the wind picked up again. I guess the eye had passed, and the backside hit with the same intensity. The up-and-down ride went on again, and some more men were lost overboard. Finally, two hours after he made the turn, the ship was tossed roughly on the sandy beaches south of Agadir, Morocco. Only six of the fifty men survived the ordeal; twelve were killed from being thrown against the bulkheads. The storm continued for three days, and it turned peaceful again."

Virginia squeezed his hand tightly and winced in pain once again. "What time?" she gasped.

John checked the clock. "Twenty-three minutes since the first. Do we call the doctor now?"

"Not yet. Keep talking. This is interesting."

"Well, the men left him, and he stayed for two weeks in the closest village he could find. Then he made it overland to Spain and then to France. He took a ferry to England, took passage on a ship of the same company, and returned to America. Unfortunately, the vessel encountered another storm on the way, and Nathan got sick. He wanted to try again, but the company did not take the news well and fired him. He grew angry and convinced another company to hire him as the Captain. He went to Dover, Delaware, but when he walked onto the boat, the memories of the hurricane returned, and he froze.

“He could not move. The owners had to carry him from the ship. He wandered around the colonies for a time, trying to convince his relatives to take him in and help him start a different life. But they were very self-centered, and all refused to help him. So, he ended up a highly talented man, mending fishing nets and sails for the fishing boats in Bower’s Point.

“That’s where Virginia Rose found him, married him, and got pregnant with his first child, Matthew. Then she offered him a way to get out of Bower’s Point, and to help him overcome his fear of the ocean. Virginia had a farm in Dover and had left with caretakers. They went and worked the farm until she was pregnant with Virginia Rose Two. Then she took a vacation and used the money she has saved from cleaning and cooking jobs and selling vegetables during the summer. She booked passage on a ship bound for Puerto Rico for her and Nathan.

“Nathan threw a fit and refused to go. She kept arguing and pleading, and she got him on the ship. The final thing she said that prompted him to change his mind was, ‘If you don’t come along, Nathan, then I shall take up residence there without you. I won’t live with you and this fear of something you love. If you can’t let me help you, then live without me.’

“He went. The thought of living without her love, hurt him more, terrified him greater than the fear of dying in a hurricane. He did get sick again, and he had some nightmares, but by the time they had returned to Dover, she had worked her magic love skills on him, and he was no longer afraid of the ships and the ocean. He eventually became a Captain again.”

He stopped. “She really loved him.”

“Like I love you, darling. I just wish there was something I could do for you. You appear to me to be the most well-adjusted man I know. Your only drawback, if any, is your talking to ghosts and women in mirrors. There’s nothing I can seem to find to do for you. Although, I did get Judge McNaulty off your back.”

“There seems to be a little role reversal here,” he said. “Maybe there’s something I can do for you, anything that needs to be done.”

She groaned and tightened her hand again.

“That was twenty minutes. Call the doctor?”

She shook her head. “Let’s not rush it. Help me to the sofa.”

“Soon, you won’t have all the extra weight. Will you enjoy that?”

“Are you kidding, honey? You’re not going to believe how much I’m going to eat when Virginia Twelve makes her debut. I’m going to get back to this weight as soon as possible.”

He laughed. “Okay, point taken.” He sat down a hassock beside her.

“That was a beautiful story. Are all your dreams that vivid?”

“Not all of them. At times they’re very emotional, and sometimes they’re just a scene. But they seem to be building a history of the first Virginia Rose and Nathan to fill in the spots where diaries were not written.

“Why, I don’t know. I just know it has something to do with you. Don’t ask me what since I haven’t figured that out yet.”

“You’re amazing, love,” she said. She fell asleep for a few moments and woke on the next contraction.

“That was nineteen minutes.”

“Okay, call Dr. Richards and see what he says.”

He returned and rubbed his hands briskly. “Doctor says to go to the hospital when they’re fifteen apart. Hurry up.”

“You’re not going to be this way in the delivery room, are you?”

“No! And if you think of keeping me out, you’ll never forget it.”

"I'd do nothing in this world to stop you from seeing Virginia Twelve being born. But I don't want you to get in the doctor's way."

"I won't. I'm always nervous before the judge enters the courtroom. Then I calm down. I'll be the same in the delivery room."

*

He did as he said, and Virginia was very happy that he calmed down.

She enjoyed the anticipation on his face as he kept out of the way of the doctor and the nurses. She smiled despite the pain and cried from an unexpected emotional rush. When she recovered from the last push, she heard Virginia Rose Twelve cry and John's laugh.

"Wow, she's beautiful and red as a rose."

"All babies look like this," Dr. Richards said.

The comment did not perturb John in the least. "Not as red as this one, Doc. She's the herald of the end of the pain and the end of the evil unleashed. It's finally ending."

Virginia felt contented as she watched John and daughter. She did not care if her daughter was a herald or not; she was glad to be finished for the moment.

The doctor held the baby up for Virginia to see.

"She's lovely, Dr. Richards," Virginia said. "Whoa, she's blonde. That's not happened before. Virginia Roses are all brown- or black-haired maidens."

"Not this one," said the doctor.

John grunted, then laughed. "She'll change! She's the twelfth rose and will be a red-haired woman with blue eyes."

"Where did you find him?" Dr. Richards asked.

"He found me, Doc. And I'll never let him go."

John repeated himself. "She will change Dr. Richards. Would you care to make a wager? Fifty will get you one hundred that before she's three months old, her hair will be red, and her eyes will change from this hazel to a blue that will break your heart to see."

The doctor regarded Virginia who beamed while looking at daughter and husband.

"Doctor, he sounds funny sometimes. However, the peculiar things he says are very truthful. If you can afford to lose the fifty, then bet him. That's one way to find out."

"You're on, John. This will be an easy fifty to make. I won't have to get up at 1:00 a.m. to fool with a dripping wet baby to earn it."

John chuckled, rubbed his hands together, and touched Virginia Twelve on the tip of her nose.

"I love you, sweetheart. You're not even old enough to work and already you're making money for me. I love it."

*

In Fountain, Colorado, George McNaulty jerked upright in the bed, waking from a nightmare. The child was small, just born, but the blow killed him as surely as if she were a giant.

"What? What was that?"

Sheila stirred beside him. "What's wrong, honey? What's up?"

“Nothing. I just thought I heard a baby crying, and it frightened me.” He shivered in the dark and felt a twinge of unreasonable fear that disturbed him.

Sheila hugged him and rested her head on his shoulder.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’re so wonderful. You’re probably anticipating your baby to come out to play. Be patient, it will be outside on time. The six months will pass quickly. You’ll see.”

He pulled her hair around and covered his face with it.

“I guess you’re right.” He kissed her on the side of her neck.

“Don’t do that. You don’t need to start something we can’t finish.”

“Not even the baby?”

“Enough. Come on,” she said, then laughed and yawned. “We will definitely finish the baby, silly man. Lay back down so I can wrap around you like a python.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jolene visited the next day, after she stopped by the nursery to see the baby first. She found Virginia watching the world news channel.

“What’s wrong with you, Virginia Rose? You’re supposed to be watching the soaps and sighing at all the love and romance.”

“Jolene, it’s great to see you. Where were you last night? We called.”

“The kids are finally adjusted, and I left them alone and went on a dinner and a movie date. Paula says hi, and she wants to baby-sit as soon as she can, even if you don’t go out.”

“Sounds good to me. Have you seen her?”

“Of course, she’s the reason for me being here, not you.” she dismissed her question with a limp wave. “Did they have to restrain John?”

Virginia chuckled. “No, he truly calmed down and stayed out of the way. It was so nice to see him there. I mean, it seriously touched me.”

“Well, you’re lucky he did. Most men don’t want anything to do with it after you’re pregnant.”

Virginia sighed wistfully and lay back on her pillow.

“What is it, girl?” Jolene asked. “I know this mood. Don’t let your mind explode.”

Virginia sighed again and faced Jolene. “Nothing, I think. It’s just that sometimes, John makes me feel uneasy. I think that’s the correct word.”

Jolene grew concerned with Virginia’s expression and pulled up a chair.

“Hey, you know you can trust me with secrets. So don’t make it hard on yourself.”

“I know that. It’s just that I believe I’m violating his trust, and I don’t like feeling that way. Do you understand?”

Jolene nodded and waited.

“It’s no big thing. He’s been having dreams about some of the former Virginia Roses, mainly the first one. I think some of it is from the diaries I let him read. However, some of the things he says, I know, could not possibly come from them because the first three didn’t write them down. Do you follow me?”

Jolene nodded again.

“Well, sometimes he comes out with very poignant statements that are not John. For example, he told me that Virginia One said she was here to help him, and he said he could talk to her in his mind. He told me of one incident that proved it wasn’t a lie, but it frightened me. And last night, after Virginia Twelve was born, he told the doctor that her hair would change from blonde to red and her eyes from hazel to blue before she’s three months.”

She paused.

“How long has he been doing this?” asked Jolene.

“Since we started dating. We didn’t sleep together, and it wasn’t until about four months before we married that he started reading the diaries.”

Jolene held a hand. “So, what is really bugging you? It sounds like he’s in full gear and wanting to know you very deeply. Is that it?”

“No, he says that all the dreams and things have something to do with me, and he doesn’t know what it’s about. That part bugs me. The rest is scary. I know I haven’t told you, but all Virginia Roses die before or at thirty-seven or shortly before that age. John says I’m the one who

will break the chain and talks of a curse. I don't know. It's scary, but it's a, what, a warm kind of scary. Does that make sense?"

Jolene's chuckle was nervous. "Then let him get to know you deeply and let him know if he scares you. I doubt that he'll go bonkers or anything like that. He loves you too much, hon. Sometimes when I'm around you two, the feelings of love make my head swim. He's just like a dream come true. If he says it has to do with you, trust him and let him deal with it. This is really a unique relationship. Usually, it's the woman trying to know the man. So, enjoy it while you can.

"As for the rest, I don't know what to say except that I hope you live far beyond thirty-seven. I'm sort of prejudiced on that part. I love you, even if it's not as much as John."

Virginia warmed to her comments. "Okay, Cajun Mamma. Thanks for listening."

"I must go, dear," Jolene said. "I will come back tomorrow, and I'll be here when you're ready to go home. I want to see John fuss about it."

After Jolene left, Virginia fell asleep and dreamed vividly.

Virginia walked along the beach where she married. She sat down and looked to the north, not turning her head, confident the trouble would come from there. Soon she watched another woman, dressed in the same wedding clothes come into view, walking steadily toward her with arms folded across her chest. When she stood a few feet from Virginia, she stopped and smiled.

"Go away," Virginia said. "I can't handle this." She was afraid and near tears.

The woman's voice was soft and tender. "Virginia, my love, why do you fear so many things? I will never cause you pain."

Virginia felt silly because she knew that was the truth.

"Do you fear me?" asked the woman.

Virginia threw up her hands. "I don't know, so I guess I'll just be afraid of everything! Why are you doing this?"

"In the diary of Virginia Rose Four, the answer was written, my darling. John asks the question and seeks the answer. He'll find it. What do you fear? Put a name on it so you can learn how to overcome it."

"Who are you?"

The woman smiled and burst into laughter. "Why do you always hedge the answer with a question you have already answered? Come on, Virginia Rose, Eleven. What do you fear?"

Virginia responded with tears. "I fear losing John, and I don't know why. Really. I don't like that feeling. He scares me sometimes with the things he says. I don't want anyone to look at him and think he's crazy. And I don't understand why he won't talk to me more about the things he's doing. That hurts, too, sometimes. I really don't like feeling like that."

The woman knelt and placed her hands on Virginia's shoulders. "My child do not fear a given. In mathematical problems, there is a given, a constant figure, and different solutions are found by adding variables. You and John, together in this marriage, are a given. It has been a given since before you were born. The only variables left are time and motion of the Lines of Demarcation. When they all come together, you will understand. When the correct correlations are found, John will do precisely what he must, and he will open himself to you. I know that being submissive is not to your liking, but you will learn it. Trust me. You will learn it and you will experience a true joy when you do. Until then, trust John and be happy with your life. Now, who am I?"

"The first Rose. Virginia Rose Merriweather."

Virginia Rose opened her eyes when her body jerked on the bed.

"Are you okay?" asked the nurse.

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, you mumbled in your sleep, and you looked frightened. Are you ready for Little Virginia's feeding? She's sure a hungry one."

Virginia glowed, shifted herself up, and rearranged the pillows. "I'm always ready for that, Nurse Ann. Bring her on; dinner's ready." She held out her arms and took the squirming and complaining girl. She said hello and uncovered her left breast. The complaining stopped when her lips caught the nipple.

"Tell me, Nurse Ann, do you think she'll look good with red hair and blue eyes?"

"You're kidding. Are you going to dye her hair?"

"No way. Do you want to wager that she'll change naturally as John says?"

"You're both a little loony if you ask me. Okay, how much? I can afford to win say ten dollars."

"Fair enough. Prepare to lose."

Ann left after a while and Jamie Benson arrived for a visit.

Virginia bemoaned her presence. "Oh, brother! What brings you here? Are you going to violate my probation and arrest me while I'm breastfeeding?"

Jamie frowned. "That was a stupid thing to say. Relax. We took care of this a few months ago. I don't want to mess with you; I just wanted to see the baby."

"She's busy right now, but you can hang loose, and she'll be available for autographs shortly."

"You look pleased," Jamie said.

"I am. It's so wonderful to have her on this side of me. She has been a total pain in the stomach this entire summer. I'm just glad for the few days to rest and suck up all the air conditioning I can. I'm going to fill my bags when I leave."

"It's good to see you smile and laugh."

"You'll see me smile and laugh there, someday, when I make the last payment. But, no, I won't tell you where to stick it. You've been good about this."

"Well, keep up the payments and it will be over very soon," Jamie said.

Little Virginia went to sleep and stopped suckling. Virginia moved her away and held her out to Jamie. "Take over for a moment, but don't take her away."

Jamie took the small cloth on the baby's chest and wiped the remainder of the milk from her lips. "My, she's lovely. Love that food-coma look they get."

"Do you think she'll look good with red hair and blue eyes?" Virginia asked, closing her gown, and stretching.

"You kidding? This baby looks good as is. Don't dye her hair."

"I'm not. It's part of a betting pool. John declared that she'll have red hair and blue eyes before she was three months old. Do you want to wager?"

"How much? I don't mind a bonus to my meager salary every now and then."

"The last two payments on my fines."

Jamie turned and raised one eyebrow. "Are you serious? Okay, you got it. Thank you, Virginia. I like that."

"I'm generous with my money."

Sarah Johns came before Jamie left, and Virginia made a wager for the last two payments on her fines that the baby's hair and eyes would change colors.

"I love it, Little Virginia. You're a wonderful little piece of luck. If we can stir up some more interest, I'll be off probation very soon. But, hey, your eyes and hair will change, won't they? John had better be right on this. I'm serious."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

June 15, 1999

Ralph Watson's column tempered over the years, and he credited his changes and successes to Virginia. He checked the information thoroughly and was not as loose with his pen to make accusations against individuals. He had started to add a person per month to the column who had quietly served the community in a charitable or benevolent manner. The response of his readers was overwhelming in favor of the service.

Virginia Rose looked across the dining room table at Virginia Twelve, nicknamed Dozen, age four. She took a moment to ponder what happened to make the change and gave up as she had in the past. Dozen's red hair and blue eyes had stumped the doctor and netted her a reasonable sum of money. She sat beside Jacob, three years old.

"Hey guys, what are you doing?"

"Fun things," answered Dozen. She watched an ant crawling across the placemat. She folded one tiny fist and crushed it. "Eat ant, Jacob."

"No!" He held a hand over his mouth.

"Good for you. Make you grow strong."

"No."

"Daddy is coming home soon. Go wash up and get ready for dinner," said Virginia.

"Yeah!" they shouted and disappeared up the stairs.

Virginia opened the oven door to check on the roast inside, and the aroma made her mouth water.

"Eat your heart out, Jolene! This Cajun Roast Royale will distract John from your boobs."

The kitchen door opened, and Paula came inside. "Hi, Virginia. What you're cooking smells wonderful. Where are the rug rats?"

"Washing up and probably messing up the bathroom. If you can find them, you can have them."

Paula laughed and ran upstairs to check up on HER babies.

Virginia sat out another place on the table and awaited John's arrival. She had been restless, and she felt the need to see him walk through the door.

Eventually she got her wish.

She ran across the kitchen, grabbed him before he could close the door, stood on her toes, and kissed him. "Welcome home, honey. It's exciting to see you home today."

"It's always pleasant to see you, love. What smells so good besides you?"

"Cajun Roast Royale. It's my own creation to destroy the competition."

"Mmm, I think I can bite into your creation, my darling. How are the kids?"

"They've been very kiddy today. Paula has them upstairs now. I pity her."

He laughed and sat his briefcase on the floor next to the refrigerator. He thought a moment and remembered the time Jacob played lawyer and moved it to the top of the fridge. He gave a thumbs up when Virginia snickered and went to the downstairs bathroom to wash up.

John overate the Cajun Roast, sat back, loosened his belt, patted his stomach, and sighed. "That was superb, Darling. I love it."

"Thanks, Daddy," Dozen chipped in. "I cook all day over a hot stove for you."

Virginia threw up her hands. "Enough said, I guess. Thanks honey."

Paula cleared the table and took the children out to the back yard.

"What do you want?" John asked, gazing into her eyes.

"Only you," she whispered. "When the kids are in bed, I want you."

He smiled. "May I ask you a question?"

"I think so," she whispered.

"When Dozen, and Jacob were being weaned, why didn't you let me nurse before you stopped?"

Her eyes widened, her brows shot up, and she studied him a moment before she answered. It had been a few months since he had approached her with questions of Virginia Roses.

"I don't know, honey. I really didn't know you wanted to do that. What brought that subject up?"

"I don't know. I know that people say that the baby has a special bonding when they nurse at the mother's breast. I just wondered why you never offered that bonding to me."

She twisted her mouth to the right and moved the hair from her forehead. She stared at the tabletop a moment.

"Well, when the next baby comes along, I'll do that for you. Is this something from the diaries?"

"No, Nathan did that. Virginia Rose One badgered and talked him into doing it. Both enjoyed it."

"It's been months since you said anything about the Virginia Rose history. I thought it had slipped away. That would feel weird, but we'll do it, love. It's about time I got pregnant again anyway."

"Well, I think that Ralph Watson might have done something to help renew the spark if the Virginia Roses."

She rolled her eyes, and her shoulders sagged. "Oh, brother, what did he do?"

"He came to see me in the office about a month ago. Gosh, I didn't tell you that, sorry. There's a rumble about Judge Walter McNaulty in New Castle County again. He's made a few very shaky decisions, and one has backfired on him. Anyway, Ralph asked me if I wanted to work on a book on the McNaulty family history and the Virginia Rose history. He suggested a historical novel comparing the failures or successes of the two families. I was already doing research on the Virginia Roses, so I decided to help him."

"Something keeps you going, huh? Don't you ever learn enough about my family or me?" She spoke in a facetious manner, but she liked the news.

"No, not until I've recorded every cell and every thought or feeling that you could think or feel. One can never get an overload of the Virginia Roses. One can mainline on your love forever. I'm addicted to you, and I love every craving and fix."

*

In Belle Rose, Louisiana, a worried employer went to the police department. One of his secretaries, Mandy Phillips had disappeared and after three days of calling, sought their help. The desk sergeant sent him to the detective who handled missing persons.

"You say she hasn't done this before?" asked Detective Adams.

Anthony Drake handed the completed form to the detective. "No, she's consistently punctual and when she can't make it, she always calls to let us know. But, even that is rare for her."

“She got any boyfriends?”

“Only one since her husband left her and was later found dead. She avoided men for a long time, until this George McNaulty showed up. He met her at the hot dog stand outside the Post Office and within a week, she was dating him and her whole attitude changed. Before that happened, she was mediocre to okay; then she was, wow! He was good for her and made a difference in her life.”

“Where does he live?”

“He lives with her in her apartment.”

“Has anyone seen him?”

“No. None of her friends that I know of has seen them.”

“Well, we’ll do a courtesy check on her apartment,” Adams said. “Want to come along?”

“I’d like that. She is special to us.”

He followed in his car and waited in the lobby of the building while Adams talked with the manager. The manager came out and glared at Drake.

“I hope you’ll be satisfied when you see that she’s just on a holiday or home with her mother for a few days. Busybodies are a pain in my ass.”

They rode the elevator to the fifth floor and walked down the hall to her door. The manager opened the door and stepped inside and out of the way of the police. Drake went to the back bedroom door while the Adams checked in the kitchen and front bedroom. When Adams joined Drake at the bedroom door, Drake stood, pale and pointing silently.

Adams stepped past him and stopped; Drake found the bathroom.

“How could any man stand doing that to a woman?” Drake asked when he could finally talk coherently. “That’s worse than sick. That’s what? Is he possessed by a demon?”

“There were two more broomsticks you didn’t see,” Adams told him. They were stuck through her sides, so they would pierce the lungs. They’re probably the ones that killed her.”

“She was with child too. She was so excited to be pregnant by him. Damn. I could kill him.”

“Well, you say this guy was named George McNaulty?”

“Yes.”

“Where did he come from?”

“Supposedly, he came from Colorado. He was such a kind man when I met him. He even worked in the church as a lay minister. Damn him!”

Detective Adams told Drake to go home, and he waited until the crime scene officers showed up for prints.

“This is going to be a sick one that might never get solved,” he thought.

Back at the police department, he ran an FBI check on George McNaulty. Twenty-six minutes and thirty-eight pages of charges and warrants later, he hoped that he was wrong.

In Preston, Mississippi, George McNaulty sat in a restaurant and talked with a beautiful and divorced waitress. The stops at his table grew in length until she went on break, and she joined him at the booth, a policy frowned upon by the management.

“George, where have you been all my life? I’ve never met someone like you. Why can’t more men talk about important things? You aren’t looking for a girlfriend, are you?”

“I don’t know. I might be looking. First, I must find a job. I don’t want to live off a woman. I want to support my woman.”

Sable smiled. "You're a gem. I'll go to dinner with you tomorrow. Just one thing, though, I don't like to engage in sex on the first date."

George regarded her serious attitude. "Hey, Sable, you're talking about your own body here. You choose when that happens, babe. A week, a month, never, whatever. I won't rush you; I want you to be comfortable. If you never are, that's okay too. Starting as friends is a good thing."

Sable blushed. "I hope you're serious about that, George. This is a miracle come true. We should clone your attitude and sell it to other women for them to use on their men. We'd make a fortune."

*

The next morning, Virginia woke up with John on his day bed in the den. "Morning, lover. How do you do the things you do? I felt like I passed out drunk last night."

"You did. Don't tell me it's time to get up?"

"I won't. I'll let the office call and remind you of the time."

"I think the next time, I'll have to turn down the volume a little. You woke the termites and spiders and the kids. We'll also have to do something about these cheap sheets. That could amount to quite a sum of money over the years."

"We'll do nothing, my love. We won't change a thing. So don't worry about the sheets. Next time, stuff a clean sock in my mouth, and I'll wear boxing gloves."

Three days later, Shirley Montgomery, John's secretary, engaged in a strange conversation over the telephone. She looked about the office and saw no one around to help her.

"Are you sure she's sick?" she asked young Virginia.

"Mummy hot. Very hot. Talking really funny."

"Hang on a moment, and don't hang up the phone. I'll be on the line, okay?"

She pressed the intercom for Victor Wesley. Three times she pressed the call button and got no response, so she tried it again.

A curt Victor replied. "What is it, Shirley? I'm in a meeting here. Did you forget?"

"Sir, little Virginia Bennington is on the phone, talking about Virginia being hot, cold, and talking not like herself. I don't want to lose her on the line."

"Where's John? Never mind, he's upstate and he planned to stay up there tonight. Hold on, I'll be right there."

Victor rushed into John's office, sat at the desk, and reviewed the phone cards. He called Jolene at her office first and talked to her. Then, he moved the phone as close as possible and stretched the receiver to the door.

"She still on the phone?"

"Yes," replied Shirley. "Dozen said she went to the basement and told them to get John. It's funny; she said Mummy was naked."

"Jolene, this is Victor Wesley from John's firm. Can you get free for a moment since you know Virginia and I don't?"

"What's wrong?" Jolene asked and felt her heart and stomach switch places.

"We don't know, except the kids never called here until today. Dozen said Mom's sick and talking and acting very strange."

"I'm on the way, Victor. Tell Dozen to hang up, and I'll be there in ten minutes."

“Thanks, Jolene. Call if you need John or any assistance after you check her out. We’ll get him back downstate ASAP.”

Jolene made the distance in eleven minutes and used her emergency key for the front door. She stepped inside, and the children ran to the living room.

“Aunt Jolene, Mummy’s sick,” Dozen said.

“Yep,” agreed Jacob. “She naked.”

“Jacob,” admonished Jolene. “Stop that. Where is she?”

Dozen told her. “She went to basement. She said to call Daddy. I did.”

“Did you go to the basement to check on her?”

“Basement too cold for me. Very frightening. I’m scared to go there. I feel safer here.”

“Okay. I’ll deal with it. Will you take Jacob upstairs to your room and wait for me?”

Dozen nodded and left, holding Jacob’s hand.

Jolene went to the stairs and watched them go. She saw some of Virginia’s clothes lying on the steps and shook her head. She opened the basement door and stepped back when the cold air caught her off guard. She gingerly walked down the stairs holding the railing with her right, and her left hand against the wall. When she reached the bottom steps, she shivered from the cold and rubbed her arms with both hands. She opened the door to John’s den, and the air was colder.

Virginia lay on John’s bed; as described, she was naked. Jolene called her name. Virginia did not move. She stepped closer to the bed, and Virginia looked as if she had gone to sleep, her face relaxed and peaceful.

“Virginia?”

She touched Virginia’s right hand. It felt like it burned, and it snapped closed, and her eyes opened.

Virginia’s eyes moved up and down her body. “You’re the wrong rose. I don’t need the Southern Rose; I need John.”

“Are you hurting?”

“No, she’s too cold to hurt. Get John Adam Bennington. He’s the one she needs.” Virginia said.

Jolene stepped back, frightened. “What’s going on here?”

“John knows,” Virginia said. “Get John.”

“You’re not Virginia,” Jolene declared. “What’s going on here?”

“I am, and I’m not. Do not worry, Jolene. She will be fine when she has John. Don’t interfere in what will not harm her or you.”

“Okay.”

She backed out of the den, and Virginia returned to her peaceful state.

She ran up the stairs, not slowing down until she cleared the door and had it closed. She sagged against it and shivered until she warmed up.

“This is weird! Virginia, you’d better not be messing around with voodoo or some other creepy shit.”

She collected herself and called John’s office. “Shirley, this is Jolene. Virginia’s okay, but she does have a serious problem. You’d better call and get John to come home. When you reach him, tell him I’ll wait with the children until he shows up. Thanks, Shirley.”

She called Dozen and Jacob, fixed them a snack, and sat them down for some afternoon cartoons while they waited.

John rushed through the door two hours later.

Jolene still waited at the dining room table, but her attitude had grown stern. "John, are either of you messing around with Voodoo?"

John's forehead wrinkled. "No way. Why did you ask that?"

"Well, I've seen some strange things happen in the backwoods of Louisiana. This certainly looks like a Voodoo possession. I'm not crazy, John. I know what I felt there, and it scared the shit out of me. The basement is like ice, and her skin is hot. I'm taking the kids home with me. You straighten out what's wrong with her. Don't be dabbling with things you don't understand. Some of it's not a joke. No need for you two to get caught up in that hell."

John removed his jacket, said goodbye to the children, opened the basement door, and shivered at the chill air. Then, he walked downstairs, into his den, and took Virginia's hand.

She opened her eyes. "Hello, John. It's good to see you. You look well and strong. Sit beside me."

He complied. "Why are you doing this, Virginia One? Would a dream not have been enough?"

"She was dreaming, and it was a horrible one, John. I intervened to stop what would have happened. She is extremely depressed beneath the surface. She's having difficulty understanding the sullen moods that hit her without warning and cause. It is because of what's happening between you and me and the opposition, but we'll work it out, John."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and spoke. "This is a comfortable bed, and the quilt brings back memories. Matthew was the first one to be created. Nathan bugged me all night and continued after we went to bed. I told him it was not a safe time of the month, but he persisted until I could not say no. He pulled down the quilt and then my undergarments. The cool October air blew through cracks in the walls and across my thighs. It made me shiver, but so did Nathan's hands. I remember that night well. I screamed and tore the sheets and scared Nathan half silly. He thought he hurt me. I didn't hurt, John. I was ecstatic. I was certain that my screams had wakened half of Bower's Point. I was red for two days, knowing they knew what happened in my bed that night."

She sat up and grabbed him. "The days are short, John. Be strong. The Lines of Demarcation are converging on the limits, compressing the necessary things into place, and your strength will come into play. When the pain hits, it will be devastating. Regardless of that, you must NOT let her die. I know you are empathetic, which is good, but what happens to her will affect you. Don't let her die, John. Fight for the love and the life of your Virginia Rose."

She lay back and smiled. "I'm sorry, but no more time is allotted. Goodbye, John."

"Will you be gone completely?"

"No, I will be around for you for a long time. It is not finished yet."

Virginia's body relaxed, and the chill left the basement. John broke into a sweat from the oppressive heat. He heard a click upstairs, and the air conditioner kicked on as he stroked her face.

"Virginia. Are you awake?"

Her eyelids fluttered, and she moved her head.

"Where am I? John?"

"In my den on the day bed."

"Wow, what a dream." She yawned and covered her mouth. "What time is it?"

"Near five."

"Five? What am I doing here? When I lay down, I was in the bedroom upstairs."

She jerked upright and inspected herself. "I'm naked! What happened to me?"

"I don't know, lover. I wasn't here. Dozen called the office, the office called Jolene, and she came over until they got me to come home."

She shivered and pulled the sheets around her. "Am I flipping out? This is scary. Am I safe with the kids? I didn't think I was that close to 37."

He hugged her. "Yes, you're safe with the kids, darling. I think this is a message from Virginia Rose One. She wants to stop the sullen moods that are bothering you. Will you talk to me about that?"

"She told you that?"

"Yes, my love." He ran a hand through her hair, resting it on her shoulder. "Once, she said this to me. The love of a Virginia Rose cannot be held down by the coffin and the grave. Instead, it will rise and bring forth a great healing power when there is too much pain. Does that make sense?"

Virginia sighed. "It's part of the legacy, but I never thought it was real. Some sayings are meant only to encourage folks to be strong. Maybe there is something to some of them. Is that what's happening to you and me now?"

"I think so."

"Is it you or me?"

"It doesn't matter since we're one. Let's go and get you dressed and then talk about the gloomy moods. I don't want you hurting by yourself. Let me handle some of the pain, okay?"

She lay her head against his chest. "Alright. We'll talk. This won't happen again, will it?"

"No. It won't. Let's go now."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Virginia's sad moods were no longer a burden within a week, but she was restless. She paced the floors, yelled at the children for minor things, and stayed that way most of the morning. Finally, she was happy to see John come home and retreated to the bedroom with a cup of coffee, the newspaper she had not read during the day, and one from three days earlier. She closed the door and read them silently, and Ralph Watson's column upset her.

"Oh no, Ralph. Why did you do this? You couldn't have asked. She'd never have given you permission. But, oh, damn, man, don't you know what you're doing by now?"

She clipped the article about Jolene Anderson out of the papers and stacked the others for disposal. She read about the volunteer things that Jolene did in her spare time. She worked every weekend in the Salvation Army soup kitchen, worked some free hours for the Blood Bank of Delaware, etc. Ralph even put a picture of her along with the story.

"Yes, Ralph, Jolene's happy doing these things, but she doesn't want the publicity. It's meant to be between her and God. I hope they still have the maniac in prison."

She looked at the clock in the bedroom. It was 9:00 p.m. "Wow! That was a fast break." She called Jolene and got the answering machine. "That's right. The children were going out to a party. Jolene's out for her own party. I'll call later."

She went downstairs and thanked John for the break. He sat on the sofa with the children both sleeping on his lap. "Don't mind at all, sweetheart. I enjoy this over depositions and reports. We have two great children."

*

A Delaware State Trooper stopped behind a car on Route 8, west of Dover, near Hartley. He called in the license number, and the report returned, Jolene Anderson, no tickets, and no points. He thought about leaving and checking on the car the next day. Then for no reason he could determine, he checked the vehicle first.

He turned on his flashlight, checked the empty front seat first, and then shone it into the back seat. His beam illuminated Jolene's frightened face. She had a rag stuffed into her mouth and was naked with her hands behind her back. He thought they were tied and probably her feet also. Neither of the left doors would open, and he ignored the opposite side. Instead, he ran to his car, got the tool for unlocking cars, and called for an ambulance and backup.

He opened the driver's door and unlocked the back door. He opened it and bent his head inside to see her better. He saw a rather large rope around her throat and asked if she could hear.

Jolene mumbled.

"I will unlock the other side and open the back door. Then I'll get the gag out and the rope from around your neck."

Jolene whimpered and shook her head. Then, she moaned and tried to spit out the rag.

The officer stopped, perplexed at the terror in her eyes.

"I'm not leaving. I need to open the other rear door, Miss."

She renewed her whimpering, and the pleading look on her face was pitiful. Tears flowed down her face, and she made more spitting sounds, trying to remove the rag.

Against his better judgment, he leaned back across the car and removed the rag from her mouth.

"Don't open the other door! If you do, you'll slice my throat open. There's a wire under the

rope. I don't care if you touch me to help me."

He braced himself and moved the rope around her throat. He could see some bleeding where her struggles to stop him had already cut into her skin.

The ambulance arrived, and the attendants hurried toward the car. He stopped them and had them hold until he freed her.

She breathed a heavy sigh and smiled at the attendants waiting for her. Then, when she was on the stretcher, she started another fuss, yelling for the officer.

"I'm going to follow you to the hospital, Ma'am. We can talk there."

"No, you don't understand! You've got to go now to 103 Messick Lane, Bentwood Estates. Please go and help her before you talk to me."

"Help who, Miss?"

"My daughter, Paula. When he does this to me, he also does it to her; damn him. Please kill him for us. Make him stop."

"Who does this to you? You know him, Ms. Anderson?"

"It's George McNaulty, my ex-husband. I change my name and move, and the courts let him out so he can find me and Paula. Please kill him. I can't stand this anymore."

"I'll get some cars there, Miss. You let them take you now."

The officer called the dispatcher and asked them to send a car to the address. He added that they might want to call Sarah Johns, for the location was close to her. Having a woman on the scene would also be a good idea. He also requested a check on the name of George McNaulty.

*

Sarah Johns answered the phone, shook herself awake on the second request, and memorized the address.

"Possibly a rape of a minor daughter? In this neighborhood? Yes, I'll go. Is there a backup? Oh, I'm the backup. It's only three blocks around the corner."

She arrived at Jolene's house simultaneously with the patrol car. Both outside doors were locked, and all the ground-level windows were down and locked. She stood on the kitchen porch and told the officers not to watch.

She removed her weapon, smashed one glass panel, and unlocked the door. They went through the house quietly and quickly, looking for suspects, and found nothing on the bottom floor. They extended their search through the upper rooms and found Steve tied in his closet, beaten unconscious.

Sarah sent one of them to call an ambulance and have one standing by.

They found Paula, tied spread eagle across Jolene's bed. She was conscious and staring at the ceiling. She turned her head slowly when Sarah entered the room. She said nothing until they had removed all the ropes from her hands and feet.

"Sit up now, honey, and we'll take the rope from your neck," coaxed Sarah.

"No. Something is cutting me under the rope, and it doesn't move."

Sarah passed her hands under Paula's neck and felt the thin piece of wire. If anyone moved the mattress, it would cut her throat. If she had sat up or the ambulance attendants had been in a hurry, they would have killed her.

"This is sick!" Sarah said. "Find me a pair of scissors so we can get her off the bed."

"Did you find Steve and Mommy," Paula asked.

"Yes, my dear," Sarah said. "We have Jolene in the hospital, and Steve's on the way. Who

did this?"

"George McNaulty, my father. I don't know why he does this. We don't hate him. We want to be left alone. But I guess it's too much to ask of him."

Sarah saved her answer until she was alone. Then, she found some clothes for Paula and held the crying girl until the second ambulance arrived.

"Please tell Virginia Rose and John about this," Paula requested. "They need to know. We've spent too much time around them."

The hospital released the Anderson family the following day before noon. Virginia Rose still felt the anger gripping her after Sarah Johns delivered the news earlier. She told Sarah that if it cost her life in prison, she would kill George McNaulty on sight. Sarah just hugged her and said she would not arrest her for that.

Virginia was there to pick them up and take them home. However, she took them to her home instead and retrieved her children from the neighbor. That proved a valuable therapy for Steve and Paula.

"What are you going to do?" Virginia asked Jolene.

"I don't know anymore. I have a gun, but I didn't have it with me. If I had, he'd be dead right now. I will start carrying it and stay home nights until he tries it again. Then I'll bury the bastard. I'll rely on my own sentencing technique."

"I wish I could help you," Virginia said. "I feel helpless."

"Don't worry. This will pass someday. John said if he's caught this time, he'll get the death penalty, and that will finish it. They have a very intensive search on. In the meantime, I'm leaving. I won't surface until I read of his death.

"I love you very much, Virginia, but I'm not even telling you this time. Can you forgive me for that? I'll contact you when it's over, if ever."

"I can forgive that. I know how you feel. Go with love and go with God."

"Two days max, and I'll call you for a ride to the airport."

"You got it, Cajun Mamma."

*

George McNaulty viewed the canal and the banks under the trusses of the St. Georges Bridge. He rubbed his nicked and stinging knuckles and gazed at the five youths he had tied to the bridge pylons and trees beside it. It was the evening of the day after he had raped Jolene and Paula.

"You young punks are a sick bunch. You don't have any idea of how to be a criminal. You always have someone guard the entrances to where you're dealing. When someone has a gun on you and says give me the cocaine, that's what you do. You can get revenge later.

"Now look at you. You want to be bad and fight. One of you is dead, the other five tied up. I have the cocaine and all your money. I also have your car. Very fucking stupid, you dip shits. You need a few lessons."

He stepped to one of them and pulled a switchblade knife from his boot. He opened the blade and swished it before his face. "Reality says a gun is better and deadlier than a knife. If I hold a gun on you, forget the knife."

He jammed the knife into the boy's stomach and pulled it upward. The boy screamed, and George pulled out the knife. He stuck it in the boy's left side and pulled it across the stomach to

the right. He dropped the knife, and the boy sagged against the ropes.

“Knife threats under a gun are stupid.”

He shot the rest of them and drove away in their car with the cocaine and the money. He went to a remote beach north of Dover and slept until morning.

*

Virginia drove to Jolene’s house after leaving her children with a neighbor. She talked while Jolene finished the last of the bags, carried two outside to the car, and put them in the trunk. She sat in the driver’s seat and watched Paula in the backyard, looking at the barbecue pit and the picnic table.

“She’s probably remembering the celebration when I was finally off probation,” Virginia told herself. She waited for Jolene and Steve to come out the front door with the last two suitcases.

She heard three shots and snapped her head to the left. She saw Steve grab his chest and fall backward on the concrete walkway.

“No!” she screamed. She tried to move and got tangled in the seatbelt for a second.

“No!” she yelled as she watched Paula run past the car and head for Steve on the ground.

“Stop! Get down, Paula!”

Paula stared at Steve and ran to the front porch. She put her hands over her face and shrieked.

Virginia freed herself and ran to where Paula was backing away from the porch.

“Get down!” she screamed again, shoving Paula hard to the left.

Paula fainted from the shock before she hit the ground.

Virginia stumbled and righted herself for a split second before the bullet hit her in the back. She felt herself rise onto the tip of her toes and then move toward the flower bed.

“Oh, God, no!”

Her hands moved in circles as she tried to reverse her direction, but she fell face down in the flower bed. Her stomach hit the wooden picket fence around the bed. Her face slammed into the dirt amongst the flowers, and she tried to scream again before blackness enveloped her.

Sarah Johns had not left her driveway before she received a radio call about a man with a gun around 103 Messick. She heard the gunshots while she called for backup and drove in that direction.

When she rounded the corner, she saw Jolene sitting on the front porch, her legs sprawled outward on the steps, her arms limp at her side, and her head facing the ground. Steve lay on the walkway and Paula on the grass to the left of the house. She saw one person in the flower bed and winced at the picket fence. The man with the gun sat in the car, watching the figures on the ground.

Sarah thanked her luck and let her car hit the back of his. She watched his head snap back and put the car in park. She slid across the front seat and approached the vehicle from behind to the right. She thanked God that he had both the windows down.

“Drop the gun out the window!” She moved slowly and crouched beside the door.

“That hurt, bitch!”

His face frightened her for a moment. “You’ll hurt worse if you don’t drop the gun out the window. Do it now!”

“Fuck you,” he said and moved the gun toward her window.

Sarah shot him in the right leg, and he stopped long enough to scream and grab his leg.

“Damn, you shot my leg, bitch! Stop it!”

“Drop the gun out of your window, buddy! When you do, I won’t shoot you again. The next one will hurt worse than that.”

He shook from the pain in his leg and turned his hand in the opposite direction. He released the gun out the window.

Sarah held the gun on him and pulled the handcuffs from her belt.

“Reach your right hand this way! Come on, move!”

He slowly brought his hand around, and she snapped the cuff on his wrist. She jerked the hand toward her and momentarily laid her gun on top of his car. Then, she grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled him across the front seat. She kept his face up and pulled his left hand out the rear window.

She fastened the cuffs and ran across the street to where the victims lay.

One close look at Jolene, two holes in her chest, and the puddle of blood on the stairs told her fate. She checked Steve, and his heart was still working, but faintly. Paula appeared to be unconscious from the shock of the trauma.

She devoted full attention to the woman in the flower bed.

“Oh, Virginia Rose! No, not you.”

She stepped across Virginia’s body, saw her fingers feebly opening and closing, and shuddered as her ragged breaths made horrible rasping sounds. Finally, she kneeled and cleared the dirt away from her face.

“Pain,” Virginia groaned.

“I’m sorry about this, sweetheart, but you will surely die if I don’t move you. I shouldn’t move you because of the back wound, but I must. So, please hold on, babe.”

She straddled Virginia, caught her under the shoulders, and lifted her from the pickets. She knelt on the grass and cradled Virginia in her arms.

She saw six of the nine pickets from one section had entered the stomach and up at an angle across her left rib cage. Blood oozed from the wounds.

“Pain,” Virginia cried, her voice shaky and scared. “So much pain. What happened?”

Sarah worriedly glanced around her. She could not afford to leave her, even for a moment.

“What the hell,” she said. She raised her knees to support Virginia’s head and removed her blouse. She rolled it up, pressed it across as many of the wounds on Virginia’s stomach as she could, and cradled her head again.

“Pain,” Virginia cried again. “I’m sorry.”

Sarah felt like joining her. “Don’t say you’re sorry. Instead, you scream, cry, curse, anything you must do to deal with the pain. Don’t worry about my non-virgin ears.”

Virginia took a painful breath and screeched a loud, mournful noise.

“There you go,” said Sarah.

“Damn! Where’s the ambulance and the backup? It’s been hours since I got here. Where are you? Hurry, please?”

Virginia screamed again and started coughing.

Sarah held onto her and waited, fighting to keep from crying. She had seen dead bodies before but nothing as bloody as this crime scene.

Steve shifted positions and moved to his hands and knees. He coughed, and a spurt of blood came from his mouth. He stood after a moment and looked around, dizzy and disoriented. He

walked past Sarah very unsteadily and knelt by Paula. He touched her hair and bent over to kiss her cheek.

Next, Steve saw the car in the street and the gun beside it. When he reached the car, he crawled on his hands and knees. He picked up the gun and opened the driver's door.

"Steve! I'm glad to see you. I need your help, son. Unfasten me, and we'll go away from here, okay?"

"You won't hurt Paula anymore." He kneeled and raised the gun, steadying it on the seat.

George screamed and kicked at it with his good leg, but the cuffs kept him out of reach.

Virginia screamed once more and coughed up some blood.

Sarah turned to see why George screamed and saw Steve holding the perp's gun with both hands.

"Please, Steve! I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I won't do it again. Really, Steve. Come on, put the gun down. You don't want to kill me. I'll leave them and take you with me. We'll have a great life together."

Steve blinked and calmly said, "You won't hurt Paula again."

He pulled the trigger, and the gun kicked.

George screamed and sagged down on the seat. Steve righted himself and rested the gun on the seat again, aiming for George's face. He pulled the trigger again, and the weapon threw him back into the street.

Sarah screamed, and the fire department siren drowned her voice.

Steve lay still for a moment and then crawled back to Sarah. He caught her right arm and pulled himself up to look at her face.

"Had to stop him. Tell Paula that Dad won't hurt her again."

Sarah blinked back tears. "Okay. I'll make sure she knows."

Steve coughed another puddle of blood, sagged against her, and died.

Sarah held him in her right arm and listened to Virginia Rose crying from the pain.

Richard, her husband, heard all the gunfire and the sirens. He arrived on the scene moments before Chief Mitchell. He took off his coat and draped it across Sarah's shoulders.

"I'm sorry," she cried to him and Chief Mitchell. "I can't help crying. Fuck being strong now."

"Don't worry, honey," said Richard. "That's okay. No one's going to blame you for crying."

"Where's the ambulance and backups, Chief?" she demanded angrily.

"Sarah, it's only been fifteen minutes since the call came for them. They'll be here."

"Fifteen minutes? It seems like hours."

Richard knelt behind her, supported her until the ambulance arrived, and took Virginia Rose from her arms.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

John was in court in Wilmington, where he defended a client on charges of Armed Robbery, Attempted Murder, and Possession of a Deadly Weapon during a felony. Against John's advice, the client chose not to plea bargain, and the case went to trial. John had difficulty defending the man because his client's witnesses were unreliable. The DA cross-examined one of them, and John shook his head as the witness changed his story for the third time.

"Why's he doing that?" the client asked.

"Don't ask me, Mr. Sampson. You're the one who came up with him, not me. I told you to plea bargain. You would have served a lot less time."

"This sucks," the client said.

A bailiff entered the courtroom and delivered a message to the judge.

The judge raised his brows and listened until the DA was finished.

"Counsels, please hold any further questions. This court is recessed until 9:00 a.m. tomorrow morning. I want both counsels in my chambers in two minutes." He rapped the gavel, and the courtroom cleared.

"This is a rough one, John," said the DA, joining him at his table.

"You're telling me? I told the fool to go with the plea bargain, but no. So, it's his fault. I don't feel a bit sorry for his stupidity."

They walked to the Judge's Chambers and opened the door.

"What do you want us for, Your Honor?" asked the DA when he and John sat down.

The door opened, and Ned Quinn, a senior partner from the Wilmington Office of John's firm, entered swiftly.

"John, do you have your car keys on you?"

"Yes, I do. Why?" asked John, reaching into his pocket.

"Give them to me!"

John started to remove them and stopped. "What's wrong?" His face paled at the unusual demand.

"Let me have them, John." He turned to the judge and the DA. "Can we continue this trial until Monday? We'll have someone else on the case then."

The judge and the DA agreed.

John handed them to him. "No. Please no! Not Virginia?"

Ned pointed to the door. "There's a state trooper outside, John. He'll take you to Kent General in Dover. Marlene Johnson, your neighbor, has your children. We'll get the car back to Dover. Go and don't worry about anything trivial; the firm will handle it all. We'll handle everything. Go."

"Is she dead?" he asked.

"Not when I talked to Chief Mitchell. Go on, man!" He shoved John toward the door, and the trooper took charge.

After thirty-five minutes of an hour's drive, the car pulled into the emergency-room area of Kent General Hospital. The trooper went with John to the desk. John calmed down and no longer cried; he just looked numb. Finally, they located someone to help them, and the doctor in command of Virginia came to get John.

"How is she?" he asked.

"She's alive." The doctor took him to the elevators. "By all rights, she shouldn't be, and I don't know how she is. She should have been dead at the scene."

"What happened?"

"She got shot through the back. The bullet cracked two disks, and her spine shifted when the other disks moved around. The bullet went through her chest and cracked the sternum. She also had six pickets of a garden fence penetrate her stomach and chest. Two of them exited her back. They sliced into one kidney, and her liver was cut. I don't know how bad yet. She has a punctured lung, and we cannot find any response to any stimulation. She'll probably be paralyzed if she lives through the operation."

John shook his head, staring at the doctor without seeing him.

The doctor helped him from the elevator.

"She should be out of the CAT scan and back in the pre-op room by now."

The doctor opened the door for John.

John saw one woman sitting in the hallway. She looked like John felt.

The doctor moved him inside and closed the door. Virginia lay on a bed with many wires and tubes attached.

"Is she awake?"

"Yes. We've given her a lot of painkillers, but we haven't given her the pre-op anesthetics yet. We're waiting for the results of the scan. We need that to determine a proper plan."

John walked to the bed and touched her hand.

"Hello, Virginia Rose. What's up, girl?"

Her eyes opened immediately. "He killed Jolene. He killed her."

John squeezed her hand. "I know. I heard. I'm sorry."

"I can't move my arms or legs. This isn't right, John. I can't move at all except my head. I hurt across my stomach. I'm all fucked up, John. I can't live like this."

"You will, Virginia."

"No! Please, John? You don't understand. Let me go. I hurt too much. I don't want to live this way. Please? I beg you, love, let me go."

John struggled to keep the tears back. "Be strong like the ocean, John," echoed through his head. "You must not let her die."

He held her hand tightly. "My darling, I can't let you die. You must live. You'll be alright someday. I can't let you die."

"No, you can let me go, please?" Virginia begged. "Don't let them operate. Please? If you love me, let me go."

John lay her hand down and kissed her. "I'm sorry, Virginia, I can't do that."

She sniffled and held his gaze as he stood. "I hate you, John Bennington."

"No, Virginia. Stop this."

"I HATE YOU!" she screamed.

John turned and looked at the doctor who shook his head. "Go ahead, Doc. Are you ready?"

The doctor nodded, and the nurses came to the bed.

She screamed again. "NO! JOHN! LET ME DIE! PLEASE! I HATE YOU!"

John walked to the door and closed it behind him.

"I HATE YOU!" she screamed again, her voice trailing to nothing.

The woman stood and approached him.

"Hello, John. Do you remember me?"

“Sarah Johns, I believe.”

“Yes, I was there and got her off the fence this morning. She’s hurting now, but she’ll recover. She didn’t mean that.”

John smiled wryly. “I know. Still, it hurts to hear. Have you been here all along?”

She nodded. “I knew you’d be here eventually. Are you going to wait, or do you want a ride home?”

John looked at her and looked at the ground. “I guess I’ll go home. I can go crazy there better than here. She’s out of my hands now. Thanks.”

“Oh, how’s Paula? Did she make it through the slaughter?”

“The girl? Yes, she’s downstairs in a room. She’s under sedation, though, but she asks about you when she does talk.”

John nodded. “I’ll see her tomorrow. She’s going to need a lot of help.”

“If you need a ride to or from here, call me. I’ll give you, my number. I’ve been relieved of duty for a few days.”

John paused.

“I’m a mess. I lost control of myself for a while when I was taking care of Virginia. The Chief wanted me to calm down because I didn’t take enough caution with the suspect’s gun, and his son killed him. So, I’m free until the investigation is over. I did what I thought was right. Her life was more important than his.”

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Virginia woke from the anesthesia face down on a bed, staring at the floor.

“Why am I still alive?”

“Because you are,” the doctor said.

“What are you doing to me?”

“Putting a brace on your back to hold it in the correct position until it heals. You’ll heal and we’ll take it off in about five to six weeks.”

“I won’t live that long. I won’t eat. I won’t live like this.”

“Many other people do. You’ll be surprised at what you can do.”

The door opened and John entered the room and tried to be cheerful.

“Hello, Virginia. How are you today?”

“Fuck you too, John! You needn’t bother coming around until I’m dead.”

“Sweetheart, you don’t need to be this way. You can live and be productive. And the possibility exists that you can walk again.”

“I hate you and I won’t speak to you again in this lifetime. I’m done. Get used to it.”

She said nothing else to him, not that day nor anytime he came to see her. Finally, she refused to eat, and they connected her to the IVs and threatened a feeding tube to keep her alive. She changed her mind and began eating again. Still, she would not talk to John and refused to see her children.

“What are you going to do, John?” the doctor asked. “She’s healed and she’s ready to be moved out of here. What are you going to do?”

John shook his head and stared at the wall. “This is crazy, Dr. Masters. I don’t know what I’m going to do with her at home.”

“There are convalescent centers that will take her, and your insurance will handle it.”

“No, doc. If I do that, I might as well go to her now and kill her. I’ll take her home.”

The doctor went over several things for her.

“Virginia, why are you doing this?” Sarah asked her.

“It’s his fault. He could have let me go.”

“You can’t hate him for that. What would you have done if this was John? You’re being unrealistic to hate him.”

“I don’t hate him any longer. I’m just not speaking to him, there’s no reason. I’ve nothing to say, now or ever.”

“Virginia?”

“Look, you don’t know how it feels! You don’t know, so don’t even try to say I’m wrong for feeling this way. Just shut up.”

Virginia Rose arrived at her home two months after the accident. She continued her silence. Sometimes when John was not around, the children would go to the bedroom and try to talk to her. She said very little, but she seldom yelled at them to leave. John had the burden of dealing with her silence. Two months after she came home, he neared his breaking point.

He mixed himself a drink, sat down in the dark living room and listened to the ticking of the antique mantle clock. He raised the glass toward his mouth and his hand stopped. He looked at it and it began to shake. He sat the glass down.

“Why, Virginia Rose One? I’m near the end of my strength. The ocean I wanted to be is nearly depleted. I can’t take it anymore. Now I can’t do this?”

“My darling John, your strength has held sufficient, and the Lines of Demarcation are moving again at last. Patience. Please. You must see this through. You have read it, and you were told. You will make it, John. Do not drink. It will hurt you both.”

He sighed. “Just this one? I won’t mix another.”

“Okay, John. I am sorry this hurts so much. Patience, please. Drink up and sleep.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

October 1999

Virginia lay and hopefully felt the last fly of the season playing around her face. She moved her head nearly every thirty seconds as it persisted on landing somewhere on her face.

"Damn you! You can go somewhere else on me, and I'll never know it. Why do you want to hit my face?"

She blew on it while it buzzed around her face.

"Come on, sucker! Land on my lips for just a second or less. Come on. I dare you! I'll bite you and spit you across the room. When you bounce off the closet doors, you won't mess with me again."

She heard the doorbell ring downstairs and both her children yelling about who was going to answer it. Later the door slammed, and she heard nothing.

"Probably just a salesman," she sighed.

Five minutes later the door opened, and a woman entered the room. She wore a yellow skirt and white blouse with a yellow blazer to match. She wore her blonde hair tied back with a white scarf. She closed and locked the door behind her.

Standing beside the bed, she said, "Hello, Virginia Rose Bennington. How are you today?"

Virginia responded with her mean streak. "Who are you? You're not supposed to be here. Get out!"

"I'm me. Aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

"No, I'm not. I don't want you here. Go away!"

The woman sat down on the side of the bed anyway. "You don't have to be rude because you can't move. How long have you been here like this?"

"None of your business! Who are you?"

"My name is Julie Ann Morrison. I thought your name was Virginia. I do think we'll have to change that to Bitch or something else derogatory because you are."

"Get out of my room and out of my house!"

Julie stood with a sinister smile. "Or what? What are you going to do? Your children can't help you, and John's not home. What are you going to do, Virginia?"

Virginia stared daggers through the woman.

"Do you have any feeling at all in your body? Any feeling anywhere?" Julie asked.

The doorknob rattled. "Virginia?" called John. "What's going on?"

"Help me, John! Get her out of here."

"Who's in there?" called John.

Julie shouted in return. "Go away, John! I'll be out in a moment to talk to you."

"Help me, John! She's hurting me!"

The rattling stopped a moment.

Julie took the top of the sheets and pulled them down.

"What are you doing?" Virginia asked.

"You won't answer me, so I'll find out myself."

"Don't touch me or."

Julie smiled. "Or what? Will you make me stop? How? Will you sit up and slap me. Jump out of bed and whomp me. Kick my ass."

John knocked on the door. "Whoever you are in there, come on out, or I'll have to break the door."

Julie sighed and picked up her purse. She retrieved a laminated card, opened the door, quickly put her hand on John's chest, and shoved him back into the hallway.

"Look, Mr. Bennington," she whispered. "I'm here to help you, not to hurt her or you. She's not in pain. She's not in danger. Please take this and wait downstairs for a few moments. I won't be long."

John looked at the ID card and nodded. "Okay. I'll wait."

Julie went back to the door. She took a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. Then, she wiped her nose and mouth and went back inside.

She walked to the bed again and smiled at Virginia's eyes, watching her intently.

"What are you doing here? I told you to get out!"

"Checking up on you."

She touched Virginia's body and lightly trailed her fingers over her skin.

Virginia moaned when her fingers touched her left side below the rib cage.

"Did you feel that?"

Virginia refused to answer.

She did it again in the same area twice.

Virginia gasped. "Okay. I feel it."

"Good."

She grabbed Virginia's feet and pulled them up, bending her legs outward. She did the same to her legs and found another area on the back of her left knee.

"Mmm," Virginia said. "Okay, I feel it."

"Wonderful. That's a good sign."

"Who are you?" Virginia asked again.

"I'm a Rehabilitation Therapist. I want to help you learn to live with the problems."

"With my handicap, you mean."

"Virginia, I've dealt with many people in my job. Most of them have full use of their bodies, yet they handicap their mind with drugs. It's a shame to see people do that. Yet, here you lay, your body is inactive, and you also want to let your mind go. That doesn't make any sense."

"I don't want you or need you here. So don't waste your time."

"You're not a waste of time. It'll help not only you but John and the children too."

Virginia eyed her harshly. "I said I don't need you, and that goes for everyone in this house. Go now!"

Julie repositioned her legs and raised the sheets. "As you wish. See you later."

She collected her purse and left the room.

Downstairs, she hung her purse on a dining room chair. John's face looked exhausted and showed signs of nearing a breakdown. She smiled at him.

"Is there a bathroom downstairs?"

"Over there to the right," he said and pointed.

A moment later, she opened the door and looked around the frame.

"John, there are no washcloths or towels here. Would you be so kind?"

John moved Jacob to the floor and went to the hall closet. He got a towel and a washcloth, returned to the door, and handed them to her.

"Come on inside," she requested. "I'm just going to wash my face and hands. We can talk

while I do that.”

John made a strange face but stepped inside and leaned against the door while she soaped her face.

“She’s a tough woman. I don’t see how you’ve made it this far without breaking or strangling her.”

“I have a powerful love. However, I’m really getting tired of the shit she gives out. Sometimes I’d like to smack her a good one.”

“Then do it. It will be good for you, and she won’t hit you back.”

She saw a faint smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I mainly deal with the rehabilitation of the body, and I also have a lot of training in rehabilitation of the mind. The doctors who operated on her concentrated on the body only. I do both. Did you know she’s ticklish on her left side, right below her ribs?”

“No. She won’t talk to me. This is a surprise to hear her talking at all. All I’ve heard is silence.”

Julie splashed some cool water on her face and washed the soap away. She picked up the towel, shut off the water, patted her face dry, and watched John in the mirror.

“Do you think you can help her?”

“I think I can get through to her, but I make no guarantees.” She hung the towel on a holder, put on her watch, and lowered the commode seat. She sat down, looked up at John, and waited.

“I don’t know if my insurance will cover your services. I hope so. You’ve done more in a few moments than I’ve been able to do since the day of the operation.”

“You can afford me, John. I’ll charge you nothing’ not a penny.”

“What? That’s crazy!”

“Well, I have a good practice in Dover. Many rich parents are paying me to get their children off designer drugs. I do, but the parents don’t change to help them afterward. It’s not long before they’re back to me. They keep me alive, and when I can, I work with children of the poor and homeless, helping them to rid their lives of drugs. This one’s on me. Don’t worry about it.”

She looked at her watch.

“Rule number one, you forget about having sex with me.”

“I didn’t think that.”

“You haven’t taken your eyes off my bottom since entering the bathroom. No sex with me. Forget it. If you even try, you will have to go to the hospital and have your testicles surgically removed from your lungs.”

John nodded and looked away from her.

“Rule number two is this, do not ever have an affair with another woman. I don’t care if the whole thing lasts fifteen minutes from when you meet until you say goodbye. If you do, she’ll know. Women like her have psychic power, and she’ll know. You think she’s bad now; try it and see what she becomes.”

John sighed and rubbed his mouth.

Julie took a deep breath. “I know. I feel sorry for you, not her. I can help her, but not you. There are no easy answers for the husband.”

Virginia’s voice shattered the relative silence. “Dozen! Jacob! Come here, children.”

John raised his eyebrows, and Julie looked at her watch. The children trampled past the bathroom and ran, giggling, up the stairs.

“We have about five minutes longer today.”

John shook his head. “I don’t follow you.”

“You will. Is there anything else you want to know or ask right now?”

“No,” he said, and his face grew pensive.

Julie sat, watched, and waited.

“How did you make her talk?” John asked.

“I threatened her. “She’s lying there, smug, and secure, and thinking that she’s got you by the balls and has nothing to worry about. Now I’m here, and she has a threat and must deal with it however she can. She doesn’t have the security of a faithful husband any longer.”

John frowned. “You told her you were my lover?”

She grinned slightly. “No, I never said a word, but she thought it. So, I messed up my lipstick after I talked to you in the hall. You should have seen the look on her face when she noticed it. It was priceless. Damn, I wished then I had a camera.”

John made a strange noise. “That was a terrible thing to do to her.” However, he grinned.

“Is she doing nice things to herself, you, or the children? When has she called them to see her?”

John did not answer. The entire scenario was eerily strange, from entering the kitchen door to now.

She looked at the door, and Jacob came in.

“Daddy, Mommy says talk to you. Come quick.”

Julie waved her hand. “Hey, Rug Rat, what did you tell your mother?”

Jacob looked at her and smiled. “You and Dad in the bathroom together. You naked.”

“Jacob, why did you lie?” said John.

Julie snapped her fingers to get Jacob’s attention. “Did you ever smash a bug and watch the inside squish out?”

He nodded. “Yep. Goes squish and no more bug.”

“Right on.” She pointed her finger at him. “If you lie to your Mommy once more about me being in the bathroom naked with Daddy, I’ll squash you like a bug.”

Jacob’s eyes widened and he grabbed John’s leg.

“Daddy, help me.”

Julie still looked at him. “Your Mommy’s hurting and lies like that will hurt her worse. She can’t move to punish you, but I will. Go and apologize to her and tell her you won’t lie again, ever.”

Jacob nodded his head and backed up to the doorway. He walked backward until he reached the stairs, turned, and ran up.

“John? Where are you?” called Virginia.

Julie stood with a broad smile. “It’ll be a tough job, but I’ll try. I’ll let myself out and I’ll leave you a card on the counter. Call me tomorrow and we’ll talk about the details.”

She shoved John in the hallway when she reached him. “Go on. Go play with your Virginia Rose and convince her that I wasn’t naked, and we didn’t have sex here.”

Julie left her card and stepped outside. She sighed and patted her shoulder.

“Two burgers, fries, and sodas are a small price to pay for victory,” she told herself. “Jacob, you’re the bestest, and I love you. I hope John doesn’t punish you too harshly.”

*

John called Julie and went to her office to visit her.

“Well, how did it go last night, John?”

“About like an interrogation from Attila the Hun is supposed to go. Don’t do that again. I almost smacked her.”

She laughed at him. “It really wouldn’t hurt her. I know it sounds mean, but she has you where she wants you, under strict control. She has total control of John Bennington. She uses her will, her silence and even the children, to keep you there.”

“You don’t talk much like a psychiatrist.”

“I’m not. I’m into rehabilitation. Sure, I have psychology, biology, and pharmaceutical courses, but I’m not a professional in those fields. I also have the degree in Physical Rehabilitation.”

“Well, what are some of the rules?”

“Last night I said some things about sex, and I said I couldn’t help you with that. However, I will help you in other ways. First, both of you need to heal over this thing. When was the last time you went out for an evening?”

“It’s been so long, I’ve forgotten.”

“You need to go. Some evenings, I’ll stay with her and the children. You go out and do something by yourself.”

“What about Virginia?”

“She’s the one lying in bed. You don’t need to lay there in bed with her. She wants you there, but you can’t afford it. If you break, you’re both gone, and your children will go into a murky system of disaster. So, get out of the house. What did you do before the accident?”

“I was working on a book with Ralph Watson, the columnist from the paper.”

“Then call him and continue. Don’t lay down in bed with her and give up.”

He sighed.

“Does what I’m saying making sense?”

“Yes.”

“Good. One more thing is this, when I start working with her, I don’t want any interference. None. Zero. What I say to her goes. You must agree with what I say one hundred percent. I will be her husband, mother, father, lover, and owner. What do you say to that? Will you give me a Power of Attorney to completely deal with her doctors, etcetera, and agree to no interference?”

“I agree. I’ll drop it off tomorrow.”

“Good. That’s important, because once she realizes that I’m not going to leave her alone, she’ll turn to you for support in getting rid of me.” She sighed. “She’s tough, but she’ll come around. It’s going to be a rough few weeks, maybe months. After she breaks, she’ll be a much nicer person. She’ll want you to do something with your life. All I can say is be patient until she changes.”

John chuckled. “You think she’ll break? Seriously? That seems like a fantasy to me.”

“I do. I just don’t know how I’ll do it. I’ll have to work with her first and be creative because she won’t believe sex between us again.

She shook her head and relaxed. “Now I have a different question, who is the other silent mass in the upstairs bedroom? She lurks, she stares, she acts creepy.”

“That’s Paula Anderson.” He explained some things about the family.

“What does she do?”

“Not much of anything. Sometimes she comes out and colors books with Virginia and

Jacob. She seldom talks at all. She does spend a lot of time staring at Virginia's door. She seems like she wants to go in and talk to her, but she can't bring herself to open the door."

"Is she going to school this year? She looks like a zombie."

"I think she'll make it. I certainly hope so. I can't put her on my insurance, so I did what I could for her. It would be easy if Steve were still around, or Virginia Rose were up and around and approachable." He paused and looked at her pensive face.

"Yes, I think the same thing, If Virginia returns from her retreat, it might help her improve. She might also give me some leverage with Virginia. The more the better. Does Virginia know she's there?"

"I don't really know. She never asked after the day she was shot, and then she said nothing. Should I tell her?"

Julie thought a moment. "No, let me do that."

"Is that all for today?"

"One more thing, did you punish Jacob for what he did?"

"No. I thought about it, and I think you did the best job of it. I felt he didn't need anymore."

She smiled. "Great. Thank you."

John looked at her curiously.

"I've got an appointment to talk with her doctors tomorrow and then I'll be at the house tomorrow evening. I want to bring the children some food and have a party if you don't mind. I'll include the clump upstairs also. So, tell her, even if she ignores it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Julie visited the hospital and spoke to the doctors who did the operation on Virginia's spine and the doctor who did the surgery on the rest of her. The neurosurgeons were adamant that she had a fifty percent chance of recovery to where she could walk and have some use of her arms. They both agreed that her mind would be the critical factor, and they told her of the screaming before the operation and the not eating afterward until threatened.

"Wow, that's horrible. John didn't tell me that," Julie said.

"He probably wants to block out that time, Mrs. Morrison," said Masters with a shrug. "That hurt him a lot and she did it again when he came to see her two days later. She told him not to bother coming back until she was dead."

Julie sighed and studied her hands on the table. The discovery nearly left her defeated. "I've got a rock to break. Anyone got a sledgehammer?"

Doctor Carter told her sincerely, "I don't envy your job, Mrs. Morrison. Good luck."

"Did she ask about the rest of her, either before or after?"

The doctors raised their brows and passed out blank looks. "What do you mean?" asked Masters.

"I mean, did she ask about the rest of her body? Like do I have one kidney left? Is my liver, okay? Can I have children again? Did she question it?"

"No."

"Well, how is the rest of her?"

She listened to an excellent report, and the only negatives were a scar on the uterus left by one picket, a spot on her left kidney, and one on the liver. None presented a life-threatening situation. Still, the doctors could not assure her that Virginia could bear children.

"There have been no cases of paralyzed women being pregnant or bearing children. But, of course, there have been cases of women getting pregnant from a paralyzed male, but I've never heard of it going the other way."

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Julie left the hospital and stopped at a restaurant to buy the hamburgers and fries. She coaxed the silent mass downstairs and ate with the children while she told them stories. She got no response from Paula, but it did not upset her. She cleared the table and went upstairs to Virginia.

"What are you doing back? I told John I don't need a therapist."

"He thinks you do, and so do I. You can't fire me or hold my money because I'm doing this for free. I'm doing this out of love. The love of a Virginia Rose is important to the world, a dead Virginia Rose isn't."

Virginia remained silent and Julie did as she wanted. She did many more muscle toning exercises than Virginia had received through her visiting nurse.

Three weeks later, Virginia had slipped back to where she was before Julie came to her. She did not speak a word unless necessary.

"Virginia, you're hurting more than yourself in this piss poor situation. Did you know Paula's here in the house? She'd love to talk to you. I heard you were close before."

Virginia opened her eyes and for a moment she looked as if to speak. Then, she closed her eyes and tightened her lips. But eventually, she did talk.

"I can't help Paula. Why don't you just go away and stop bothering me? This is shit, you know? I can't even kill myself. If I don't eat, they bring IV's and feeding tubes. I can't overdose, I can't slash my wrists, I can do nothing!"

Julie stood swiftly and placed her hands on her hips. "Okay. You got your wish. I'm leaving. Are you proud? The physically disabled bitch beat me. She showed how she can beat any love given. You win!"

Virginia's face grew perplexed.

Julie pulled up the sheets to her waist. "You got it, babe. I wanted to do what was right, but you won. I'm going to turn off the lights, and lock the door, go downstairs, and make John an offer he can't refuse. I'll take the great children that you detest, and you can lie here in the dark, behind a locked door and just die. Fuck it! You won."

She moved to the end of the bed and then returned. "No, I'm not finished yet. You've got one coming for hurting John, the children, Paula, and anyone else you've rejected. But, since you're going to die soon, it doesn't matter, does it?"

She slapped her face twice.

"I hope your death hurts, you nasty bitch."

She walked to the door, glanced once at Virginia's pale frightened face, and turned off the light. She rattled the doorknob and closed the door behind her. She made it to the stairs before she sagged against the wall and sat down on the second step.

"God, you've created a tough woman there. I can't reach her. Please help me. I can't do it and I'm hurting for her so much. Please?" She put her face in her hands and cried.

Behind her, she heard Virginia start crying. It started low and increased in volume. She heard her moan.

"JULIE! JULIE!"

Julie sat rigid and sucked in her lower lip. The mournful voice tore at her heart.

"OH, GOD, NO!" Virginia shouted and cried some more.

John ran up the stairs with Paula close behind. He stopped when he saw both her hands up and the tears streaming down her face.

"JULIE! COME BACK! I'M SORRY! PLEASE?"

"Go back downstairs and wait, John," Julie said softly, wiping her eyes. She smiled at Paula. "I've got to go to her now, or I'll lose her for sure."

Julie stood and returned to the bedroom door, paused to compose herself, and went inside. She turned on the light and went to the bed.

She kicked the mattress hard and used a harsh voice. "What? What's your problem? Huh? You want to die, so why all the damned screaming? I helped you, so stop the fussing and get on with it! You don't want to live, so die and stop the stupid drama!"

Virginia's face was red, and her eyes were red from crying. She sobbed a few more times and then spoke.

"I'm sorry, Julie. Please don't go. I'm sorry."

"So, what? Why do you care? Why should I stay? You'll only go back to being quiet and hurting people. You'll return to this big blob who don't give a shit about anyone."

"No, I won't! I want you to help me," she said and choked. She twisted her head to the side and coughed.

"I want to live! It sucks! It hurts so fucking much, not being able to touch your children and not being able to feel their touch. Damn it hurts me. It feels like my heart's being ripped out just to see them. I don't want to die, I want to live, I want to feel, I want to love. I can't do it myself."

Teach me how to live, please. I promise I won't be a nasty bitch any more. Please, Julie. I'm so sorry. It hurts so much. Please make it stop."

Julie wiped the tears from her eyes again and sat on the bed, pulling up one leg. She leaned down and caught Virginia's face with her hands.

She looked to her left and watched Virginia's right hand and lower arm twitching on the bed.

"Okay, sweet thing. I'll help you. Let me go to the bathroom and I'll be right back."

She went to the bathroom, washed her face and hands, and wet a washcloth with hot water. Then, returning to the bed, she sat and wiped Virginia's face.

"Does that feel better?"

Virginia sighed. "Oh, yes. Yes, it does."

She sniffed loudly. "I can't blow my nose," she complained.

Julie laughed. "Okay." She reached for the tissue box. "Here we go."

"Thanks," said Virginia in a calmer voice.

"If you don't mind, I'm tired. I want to go downstairs and call my husband. Then I want to sleep here with you tonight. Would you mind?"

She offered a weak smile. "Please do. I'd love that."

Julie found John in the living room and told him that things would soon be different, and she hoped he would not mind sleeping on the sofa for the night.

"That's fine, Julie. I haven't slept with her for as long as she's been in the hospital. Her morose moods just made it impossible to sleep. I couldn't spend the whole night there."

"Well, you'll soon be welcome. Where's your phone?"

He showed her the phone in the dining room.

"Go talk to her for a moment while I talk to Jeff."

While she waited for Jeff to answer, she looked into the living room and saw Paula sitting rigidly on the piano bench. She stared at Julie with piercing eyes like a vulture eyeing its next meal. Julie turned her back to the room and talked to Jeff.

"Jeff, I'm not coming home tonight. No, I'm okay now. I finally got through to the Virginia Rose. She broke, and I want to bond with her tonight. I'm sleeping here. Hey, Jeff, come on, you'll get over it. You can wait. Oh, you can't? Well, come on over. Oh, that's it, huh? Well, I owe you more than one. I hope you're keeping track. I'm not."

A pair of hands wrapped around her waist, and a body pressed against her back. Warm breaths penetrated her blouse, and a coolness replaced them when she breathed in.

"Okay, Jeff, I have to go now. I'll see you tomorrow and for the entire weekend. Yes, that's a promise. No, I'm going to sleep with pills. I love you too, Jeff. Bye." She laid the phone receiver down and rubbed the hands around her waist. She caught one hand and pulled the girl around to her front.

"Hello, Paula." She rubbed her face across Paula's head. "Is the dry spell over?"

"Yes. I think I'm going to explode."

"Well, put yourself outside if you do. Girls make a terrible mess when their brain explodes. It's like yuck all over the place and takes forever to clean up."

Paula moved her face and smiled.

"John? Come on down here."

John soon appeared.

She moved Paula into his arms. "Here you go. See my next patient until I can. Just sit down

on the sofa and dump on him, Paula. I'll talk to you later. Right now, Virginia needs my full attention."

She returned to Virginia and asked where she might find a tee shirt.

Virginia told her and Julie undressed, slipped on one of Virginia's shirts, and lay down on the bed beside her.

"Do you want to talk a while?"

"I can feel my face."

Julie touched her face and moved her fingers around her skin. When she touched her neck, Virginia moved her head and caught the hand between her cheek and shoulder, rubbing it gently.

"I'm sorry," she apologized again. "I feel so helpless, you know. There isn't one thing I can do, except talk, that I don't need someone to help me. That's a strong debilitating feeling. I really hated John for not letting me die. I wanted to finish it so bad; the pain was incredible. Maybe I saw the future and saw myself as I am now, and I couldn't handle it. I know he was right, and I'll do what I can to compensate for his pain."

"That's a good plan." She kissed her cheek.

Virginia thought of the dream in the hospital when Dozen was born and looked at Julie. "I guess I'll have to work on being submissive, huh? It will be hard to do because I was so independent. So now I'll have to change that."

Julie nodded.

"Can I really live?"

"You bet you can," Julie said with confidence. "Your mind is an amazing organ that can perform miracles with God's will and power. When did you go to church last?"

"Months ago."

"Go."

"I...."

Julie waited.

"I guess I'll have to find a way. They do make wheel chairs, huh?"

"Last time I checked they did."

Virginia laughed. "I love you."

"Good. I love me too."

Virginia laughed again. "Oh, it feels good to laugh."

"It feels good to love me too."

"Okay, joker. You look tired, really. Turn off the lights and go to sleep."

"Thank you, dear," she said, leaning across Virginia to switch off the lamp. "Don't bite my boobs."

*

Downstairs, Paula held onto John and talked to him.

"I've needed to say this for a long time, John. It was easy when Jolene was around. Steve did what he had to do that day. When we were in Colorado, he thought that was the first time for me, but it wasn't. However, that night was worse than any time before. He beat Steve, tied him up, and tied him to the doorknob with the door closed. He had me tied to the bed already. He waited until Steve woke up and then did what he wanted to do to me. I tried not to do it, John, but I couldn't help it. I screamed because it hurt so much more than any time before. I screamed and screamed, and he wouldn't stop. And Steve, oh, the look on his face as he watched and

couldn't move to help me. The look of pain on his face tortured me more than the pain I felt in my body. And I couldn't do anything to stop it.

"I have to tell you because he loved you so much. I've heard you talk to people about him, and I don't want you to hate or condemn him for what he did. I know people at school talk about it, but they've never experienced the pain he felt hearing me scream. I tried not to. I really did. I didn't want to hurt Steve, so please understand and don't hate him. That's the only way he could stop the pain for both of us."

"Paula, I don't hate him. I didn't understand before now. Don't feel afraid to talk to me."

"I'm not. It's just since Steve died, I've been sort of numb, you know? I wanted to talk to Virginia. She helped me before. She could get inside my mind, make the hurt stop, and make me feel good about myself. With her in bed and not being receptive, it just put a wall around me that I couldn't get through."

He hugged her and looked around the dim living room. "I guess you think Julie can help you?"

"I know she can, and she knows it too. The problem is that I'm not going to make it in school. I can't study, I have problems with the tests. I can't concentrate on the classes. I have trouble sleeping at night. I don't want to drop out, but I might have to and go back to the same grade next year. It'll set me back, but I can't handle it. Can you help me there?"

He rubbed her back and rocked her gently from side to side. "I'll give it my best shot. Thanks for finally talking. Just remember, this man doesn't hate Steve for killing George. Many people would have done the same, wanted to be the one to stop him, and I'm one of them."

He took her to the bathroom and washed her face as she watched him in the mirror.

"Steve constantly pushed me into you. He said you weren't a bad man, and he was right. I'm glad you took me in when Jolene died."

"No problem. By the way, if anyone asks, tell them I'm a blood relative of Jolene. Like I'm her brother or cousin. Like I'm Uncle John. Can you remember that?"

"Yes, I can. Why?"

"I don't know, I just thought of it. So, let's do that, okay?"

She agreed, and John went to her bedroom and put her in bed. Then, he walked through the quiet sleeping house and went to the basement. He sat alone on his day bed, and for the first time in a while, he prayed before sleeping. And once again, Virginia Rose One entered his dream state.

John walked through the muddy streets of Dover, Delaware, in 1773. He followed a horse and buggy that Virginia Rose One drove towards her house, west of Dover. He tipped his hat and greeted people even though they could not see him. He walked along the narrow-wooded road that wound a few times before the buggy turned off to the left. An even narrower lane took them to a farmhouse in the distance. John watched the fields of corn and what looked like soybeans. They were healthy, and he saw only two people working the fields then. The buggy pulled up to stop at the barn, and Virginia lifted her skirt and jumped to the ground. She unharnessed the horse, led him inside, and tethered him outside his stall. She left him momentarily, took some parcels, wrapped in cloth, from the buggy, and carried them into the house. The last bundle she had was Matthew.

"Life is hard, John. But life is also great. I have a good husband, and I have Matthew. But I have another one growing inside me. There is talk of building a schoolhouse, but the interest is too low. The people want to teach their children at home. They fear the government or other

people teaching them.

“If you teach your child, you can also teach him the important values to help him live in the world. However, if you let someone else teach them, you run the risk of having some other values taught that go against yours. The best way is to teach at home.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

John woke up early and talked to Paula about a plan he had developed from the dream before she went to school.

"They will never agree to that," Paula said. Finally, however, she regarded his face that said trust me and reluctantly agreed to try it.

He went upstairs and nearly opened the door when he stopped and knocked first.

"Julie?"

A moment later, Julie opened the door, bleary-eyed and yawning.

"Don't tell me it's morning already?"

"Sorry to say it is. How's Virginia?"

"Virginia's okay," Virginia said.

He walked to the bed and sat down beside her. "That's good to hear, love. I've waited a long time to hear that."

She smiled. "I think you'll hear it more often now. You ready to go to work? Give me a kiss."

"Are you finished?" Julie asked. "I can't change while you're here."

"Yes, Commander. See you both later."

*

John called Ralph Watson during a break in clients.

"Ralph, how's the book coming along?"

"Book? What's that? Oh, yes, I read one a few years ago," he joked. "I put it aside, John. I waited and hoped that one day you would come back. I don't want this to sound funny, but I missed you."

"I know what you mean. We'll be back on it soon. Virginia's coming around. She laughed last night. It sounded strange after so many months of silence. I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

"What happened?"

"It's a long story, Ralph. I'll tell you when we get together. I'm starting to dream again. The woman who appeared in my house is causing me to have a few Deja vu feelings."

"What woman?"

"You're nosey today, huh? Her name's Julie Ann Morrison. Look, I'll call you soon, okay?"

John saw two more clients, put on his coat, and walked briskly to W. T. Smithers bar and grill for lunch. He sat by the window, where he could watch the street. He ordered and sipped iced tea while he waited.

A white convertible stopped at the light on Loockerman Street, and the driver's long red hair caught his attention. She adjusted her sunglasses and turned right onto Loockerman. John noted her beauty and sighed. Within five minutes, the girl in the car was back in the same spot. Again, she adjusted her glasses and turned right. John wondered why he was concerned with the strange woman and moved his iced tea for the salad he ordered. Before he finished eating, the girl appeared twice more.

"This is getting boring. She must be trapped in a Dover Time Warp," he thought.

He paid his bill, walked to the sidewalk, and stopped beside the car sitting at the curb.

The woman removed her sunglasses and spoke to him.

"It took you long enough, Mr. Bennington. Come on and get in." She leaned across the car and opened the passenger door.

He hesitated. "You seem strange, Miss. The air is brisk, and you have no coat on, and you have the top down. Something's not in sync here."

"You're very observant, but that's a good quality in a lawyer. I wear no coat and have the top down because I love vigorous and chilling weather. This is a spring day in Finland. I love it to death. Get in, please. The cars behind are going to start honking and cursing soon."

"Go," John's little voice sounded in his mind.

He got inside and closed the door. She turned right once more and went around the block to Division Street to Route 13, turned north and kept driving.

"You don't look Finnish."

"Well, I'm fifty percent. My father came to Finland on vacation from Moscow. My mother liked men, but she did not like to fuss about birth control. So, here I am, Samantha Wilson, recently divorced. My ex was like my mother, and he has too many liabilities looking for him. He has no time for me, and I'm not working to pay child support for his babies to keep his name."

They were out of the city limits and getting close to Smyrna.

"Where are we going?" John asked, finally looking from the road to her.

"Funny, you should ask now. If I were a kidnapper, you would be in a huge dilemma. We are going wherever we end up."

She picked up a bottle of juice in her right hand. She shook it, gripped it with her left hand, removed the top, and drank. She licked her lips, sighed, and reversed the procedure.

"You don't know? This is getting strange."

"Relax. When the little voice says hit the brakes, stop, turn left or right, that's what I do. It works for you, doesn't it?"

He frowned.

"You do know what I'm talking about, don't you, Mr. Bennington?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, maybe it doesn't work as strongly in you as in me. I'm talking about the voice that no one else hears, that says, go, stop, don't go there, wait a second. I'm talking about dreams that instruct instead of entertaining. Do you follow me now? Some of that must be familiar to you."

"Talking to a woman in mirrors?"

"That's it. I no longer fight it or resist it. I just follow it. It led me to you, and I would have come inside, but the parking was not right, so I enjoyed the brisk air until you finished."

"This is weird. I had no idea you were there for me, but I watched you every time you went around the block."

"What are you searching for?"

"I was doing a history of the Virginia Roses that started in 1772 and up to the present."

"Are you married to one?"

"Yes, and we have a daughter to complete the first dozen."

They continued their journey in silence until they passed Odessa.

Suddenly she slowed the car. "Whoa, this is the place." She pointed to a cemetery across the highway on the southbound lanes.

John felt chilled, but not only from the cold air.

She used the crossover, pulled into the Drawyer Cemetery, turned right, and stopped the car.

“We walk from here.”

“What are we looking for?”

He turned to look at her when he closed the door. All around her head, colored leaves danced through the air, and the wind whipped her red hair over her right shoulder. A few strands fluttered across her face, and her bright green eyes held him rooted to the ground for a moment, probing his mind and heart.

“We’re looking for love, John,” she said, just loud enough to be heard. “We’re looking for the love of a Virginia Rose.”

She moved her right hand across her forehead and corralled the stray hair strands.

John turned his eyes away from her, hoping to break the spell.

“Do relax, John. I didn’t bring you here to a cemetery for lustful games. Let’s walk around and find what we came for.”

They roamed in no pattern and spoke seldom. Finally, she stopped in front of a grave marker at the northwestern edge of the plot. It was near the back of the cemetery, and beyond it, the ground took a sharp dip down to Drawyer Creek. The tombstone was old, weather-worn, and had pockmarks across the top and front.

However, the unique design held John’s attention after the initial inspection. It was book-shaped, surrounded on top and both sides with roses, and the engraving ran down like words on a page. The name on the left read “Mason L. Morgan, born 1734, died 1801.” The right side read, “Lucienne M. Morgan, born 1744, died -----.”

“That’s strange. You don’t think she’s still alive, do you?” asked John.

Samantha chuckled and shook her head. “I hope not. Maybe the caretakers were lax in chiseling the date of death. It was after the Revolutionary War. She could have been kidnapped or something; I don’t know.”

“What did he have to do with Virginia Rose?”

“Time will tell.”

John checked the time.

She squeezed his arm gently. “Don’t worry about time. They’ll never miss you today. Come on, let me drive you back to the office.”

They drove the return trip in silence until they neared his office. He asked for her name and phone number, and she refused. He sat gazing at her, not opening the door.

“Hey, if I’m required to see you again, I will. If not, I won’t. I know what you’d love to do with me, but I can’t let that happen. Just take care of yourself and find out what you can do for your Virginia Rose. She needs you; I don’t.”

He stepped from the car and closed the door. She drove away and disappeared from Dover.

*

At home that night, Ralph called and made a strange request.

“I don’t know, Ralph. Let me ask her husband,” and laid the receiver down.

“Yes, you may, but make an appointment when Julie’s here,” John told him a moment later.

“Did Julie take total control?”

“Yes. I’m skilled in the courtroom, and she’s excellent with rehabilitation. So, if I need that, I’ll go to her. If she needs a defense lawyer, she’ll come to me.”

“Okay, buddy, just let me talk to her now.”

John chuckled and called for Julie to pick up the phone.

He went to his den and found Paula sitting behind his desk, spinning herself in circles.

“Greetings, Paula. How’d your day go?”

“You must be able to touch people even when you’re not around, John. I talked to two teachers, and they’re considering my request. They said it was a great idea. I thought they would Just-Say-No-To-Paula. I’ll have to talk to two more and let them decide my fate before I talk with the principal. They still might want to talk to you. I told them you were Jolene’s brother. It felt weird the first time, but not later. It sounded like a lie, which it is, but it’s a necessary lie.”

“Good deal. When the last day comes close, let me know in advance so I can keep my schedule clear.”

“Will Virginia ever be recovered to 100%?”

“That I don’t know. It’s up to God now. That’s not my specialty in life, but I sure hope so.”

*

“Who was that?” Virginia asked when Julie had ended the call.

“That was Ralph Watson. He wants to come and visit you. I hope you don’t mind because I said it was alright.”

Virginia frowned. “Why did you do that?”

“Because you need some outside stimulation, and I know you used to read his column frequently.”

“I’m not sure of that. I feel fine now, but I don’t know how I’ll react to other people. You know what I mean?”

“I know exactly. The first shot of euphoria is still new but fading, and you don’t want to panic. That’s why I insisted that he come when I’m here. I won’t let you go into a panic. I hope that you don’t mind if I’m around. I insisted on that also.”

“Hey, that’s fine with me. You got it.”

“We’ll start with him and then work you up to other people. It would be best if you started thinking that you’re a member of humanity and left the handicap word behind. There’s little in life that you can’t accomplish. You’ll surprise yourself someday.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. How’s Paula?”

“She’s improving slowly. She finally started crying and talking the same night you did. I’d like you to talk with her, but you don’t need someone else dumping on you until you toughen up your petals. When you’re stronger, maybe. I’ll handle all that she can give to me.”

“Are you an angel?”

Julie shrugged. “Not the last time I checked. I’m just like you, flesh, and blood. It’s just that I have this big heart, rather like you. You haven’t found that out yet, but it’s snuggling inside you.”

“You want to go to talk with Paula?”

“When you’re finished with me.”

“Then why don’t you go and do that? Tell John I want to take him up on his offer of television in the bedroom.”

*

Julie found Paula and John. “Where are the children?” she asked.

“My babies are out in the backyard,” Paula informed her. “I know it’s nearly dark. However,

if you look out the basement window here, you can see them.”

“John, how about you bring them in and prepare them for bed but don’t put them there yet?”

“I think I can handle that. You two women take over the den. I don’t mind.”

“Julie, did John talk with you about school and me?”

Julie shook her head and listened as Paula told her of John’s idea.

“That’s a brilliant idea. Do you think it will work?”

Paula’s shoulders sagged. “I hope so. I need something positive in my life. I’ve had far too much pain.”

“When did the pain start?”

“When I was six. That’s when Dad did it to me the first time. My first mother, Diane, was in the hospital, or that’s what he said. Then policemen came around many times, and then many people started coming and crying. After that, I never saw her again. He seldom talked to me but did it to me frequently.”

“When did he stop?”

“When Jolene joined the family. She scared me at first, but she kept loving me. There was no escaping Jolene’s love. She wore me out until she got the same feeling back. Then one night, Dad did it again. She came home from a bingo game, and she heard me crying. She came into the bedroom, and she touched me, and I told her everything. I know she wasn’t my birth mother, but her love just pulled it out of me. Her love was like a sponge sucking up water. She kissed my forehead and told me to lie down for a while and not to leave the room for any reason.

“Several minutes later, there was a loud crash from her bedroom and lots of screaming, mainly from Dad. Later the ambulance came, along with the police, and they took him away to the hospital. She also took me to the hospital, and they did many things I didn’t like. Then he disappeared for a long time.”

Julie opened her arms, and Paula filled them.

“I can’t talk anymore right now. That’s enough to make me cry myself to sleep.”

“Good, but you won’t be alone tonight.”

Paula’s eyebrows bounced up.

“I’m staying here with you tonight. You need that, and I can’t let you bring Virginia down just yet, so you got me. Is that okay with you?”

Paula wiped at the tears. “What about your husband?”

“Jeff’s big, and he can handle it. His heart is, maybe, bigger than mine. Sometimes he does the same things that I do, but he doesn’t do it the same way. He doesn’t do any physical therapy, but he’s excellent when he works his way inside and pulls the pain out of you.”

“Sounds like a nice man. Sounds a lot like Jolene.”

“He is. You’ll meet him soon. I’m going to get him involved here for a little time. Right now, come along upstairs and wash your face. There’s still one thing to do for Virginia tonight. I’ll see you in the kitchen when you’re finished.”

Julie turned the corner and saw Jacob and Virginia Twelve in the living room. She motioned for John to join her in the kitchen as she opened the cabinets, took out four glasses, and sat them on the counter.

“Fill them with milk and put a straw in each one,” she said.

She clapped her hands once and whistled. “Yo, Rug Rats.”

Both children came running and giggling. Paula soon joined them.

“Okay, Guys, this is the plan. Milk and cookies in Mommy’s bed right now.”

Two blinding flashes of energy raced up the stairs, both talking simultaneously.

Julie handed the tray to Paula. "Have fun."

Julie watched John watch the children go upstairs.

"Patience," she said, taking out two more glasses and setting them on the table. She filled them with milk and sat down with the cookies.

John joined her.

"That's a good plan for Paula and her school problem." She bit into a cookie. "So, what's this about you talking to Virginia Rose One?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I had never thought of things like that before I met Virginia. Soon after, no, before we dated, the dreams started, and later, she would appear in mirrors. They give me a clear picture of her life and what she did with her husband, Nathan Merriweather. However, sometimes they give me warnings, but they never stop what will happen."

He told her about the incident one week before the major accident.

Before he stopped, Julie shivered with goosebumps on her arms.

"That's awesome, John. So, they said to be strong, and the pain would be devastating?"

John nodded. "And more than anything else, not to let her die. She's told me that so often, I'd have worried if she didn't tell me again."

"Did you ever wish you had let her die?"

"More than once. She could get under my skin deep. She never said it, but she let it be known that it was my fault for her being here this way."

"You got it. Still, you did what the dreams said, and that part was right. Did the dreams stop after the accident?"

She felt very comfortable with John, but the dreams bothered her. She did not know enough about them; however, she remembered they could be one sign of schizophrenia. She had sat in on Madeline Thatcher's trial and recalled the behavior that Madeline reported.

"Until you came along and snapped her back to reality. There's much more. If you want me to do that, I'll fill you in as we go along."

"I do. After all, I'm married to her for a spell."

He sighed. "When will I get to sleep with her for a night?"

"Soon. I could force it, but I want her to ask for it. Does that make sense to you?"

"It does, but I don't have to like it," he informed her, displaying his tongue.

From upstairs, they heard Virginia and the children laughing together.

"Are you going, or are you going to sit there?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Julie made an appointment with Nancy West. She sat in Nancy's rich but homey waiting room in one of the office complexes on the Silver Lake Plaza. She did not have to wait long before Nancy came to get her.

"Are you here as a patient or a friend?"

"Friend."

"Darn, I was hoping to make another car payment this month. Come on. What brings you here today?"

She hugged Julie as she tried to pass through the door. "You do look good. Life must be treating you kindly."

"Life's great, Jeff's greater, and I'm beyond great. I'm so great that people say there should be a law against me, and there probably is, somewhere."

Nancy closed the door. "Well, I think I can get some money anyway, for this is a delusion, visions of grandeur. Is your husband named Bonaparte?"

Julie laughed and sat on the sofa beside Nancy.

"What I'm here about is dreaming. That's one area that I don't understand enough."

"Your dreams?"

"No, the husband of a client."

"What kind of dreams?"

"From what I can gather, they're extremely lucid. They convey information and much emotion infused along with the scenes. The husband says they have something to do with his wife, but he can't put all the information together."

"Who are we talking about?"

"John Bennington and his wife, Virginia Rose."

Nancy nodded. "I remember him. He scared the piss out of Madeline. Threatened to keelhaul her and trade her to cannibals for a load of rum. She had it coming, though. Anyway, she described a unique behavior change that could be schizophrenia. However, I don't worry. It was a one-time good deal. He couldn't get to where he is with the law firm and maintain himself if he suffered from that as a constant malady."

"Then what could it be? Virginia told me that he frequently has dreams and is so hooked into them that he sometimes suffers physical pain."

"That's possible. The person doesn't always have to be asleep, either. Have you read about the Catholic nuns and priests that sometimes bleed from their hands and feet? They sometimes have scars left after the fact. Why? I can't tell you. There are parts of the mind that we can't touch."

Julie considered the matter. "Well, can they cause any psychological problems?"

"I never heard of that. Some psychiatrists are researching dreams, and there are some dream centers for studying people with sleep disorders. If you want, I can get more information from them. I would say that if they don't interfere with him and his life, then don't worry about it. If they do, there might be a reason to seek help."

"Then I have to devise a way to ease Virginia Rose's fears. I know that he sometimes makes some profound statements and talks his way through things that would boggle other people's minds. But he said that this woman, Virginia Rose One, gives him the things to say when they need to be said. Thanks for your advice and comforting words."

*

Julie left Nancy and went to Paula's school to meet with the principal and her four teachers. She felt apprehensive when she walked into the room, and it grew steadily tenser as the meeting progressed. The principal opposed every solution to help Paula Anderson continue her education. The teachers argued with him that she needed the therapy that Julie could provide. They felt her work for the remainder of the year would end in total failure if she continued. They agreed to give her private lessons and let her take the tests with the classes, which would help her with both problems. The principal felt the solution might set a precedent, and others would want to leave the school for private tutoring. The meeting ended with no resolution for Paula.

Julie went to John's office and found him in between clients.

"Why the long face?"

"That Mr. Martin is a really thick-brained person. Everyone wants to help Paula, and they've agreed to your plan. Everyone except Mr. Martin. Where did they find him anyway?"

"Seaford," he said as if that explained it.

"Well, what do we do now?"

He leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes.

"Virginia Rose One, I think that I'm stuck again. Can I help Paula without trading his backside for a load of coconut rum?" he thought.

"Anything you want, John," Virginia Rose One replied. "We will do a regular keelhauling for him. Okay? No trading for rum."

"Okay. Well, I guess Uncle John will have to go and chat with Mr. Martin. I'll see what my powers of persuasion can do for him. Is he pigheaded?"

"The worst case," Julie confirmed.

She studied him a moment. "You're not going to do what you did to Madeline Thatcher, are you?"

He chuckled and drummed the desk. "No, the cannibals stopped making rum a few hundred years ago, and unfortunately, they no longer eat people due to civilization. So, I'll be mild and humble but do my best to win. I don't want to lose Paula in a political play."

"That's good to hear. I don't know what you're going to do with these things. They've scared Virginia, and she still worries about them."

John suddenly looked old and tired. "I know what you mean. I've read many of their diaries. I'm doing some outside research on them and the McNaulty family. I know no Virginia Rose, descended from the first one, has ever lived beyond thirty-seven. Research has revealed that it only affects women. Men are excluded and die of old age in their eighties or nineties. That's also on her mind. On our first date, the Virginia Rose One spoke through me and told her I would help her break the chain. I said she would be the one to turn the bloodlines around and break a curse."

"I can understand your concern. Just try not to worry her with them."

*

Ralph Watson appeared at the house that evening. He spent some time with John in the basement den and then went upstairs.

Julie met him on the stairs and held up a hand. "I know she blamed you for the article that led George McNaulty to Jolene. I don't want anything to depress her. If you do anything to cause that, the meeting will end immediately, and I will not be charming with you. Do you understand me?"

Ralph scrutinized her face and body language. "I understand. I don't want to do anything to hurt her." He bowed his head as if surrendering to a formidable opponent.

She followed him into the room and sat on the floor beside the dresser, observing Virginia's face as she talked to Ralph.

"Hello, Virginia Rose. "How are you?"

"Alive and kicking. I must apologize for not keeping up with your columns as well as I did in the past."

"That's no problem. Not everyone reads the column or any part of the paper. I do miss your heated debates and visits, though."

Virginia sighed. "Well, you may one day experience the Virginia Rose in your office again."

"What do you have planned for the future?"

Virginia's brow wrinkled. His question reflected sincerity, and it made her think for a moment.

"What DO you have planned, Virginia? Everyone needs a plan. You'd better do something about that," she thought.

"I really don't know. No one has asked me that before. Why did you?"

He shrugged. "That's one question I ask many people. I know that you have a good mind and you're intelligent. You liked to confront people and let them know what you felt. So, I thought you might consider doing that for a profit. That's something you can do."

Her brow wrinkled again. "Are you sure about that? How would I do that? I mean, wouldn't I have to write?"

"Yes. That's necessary, but everyone who writes thinks it inside their mind before it goes on paper. You could think about it and put it on tape. I have the computer, and I have the established column. Do you think the readers would mind, say, a once-a-week guest columnist? This isn't a National Syndication yet, so I have the freedom to do what I want, so long as it helps the paper sell and maintain circulation."

"Wow!" The concept lifted her spirits and left her exhilarated. "I never thought you'd make that offer to me. I usually leave you feeling bad about yourself. So, I'll give it consideration. Thank you."

"Good. You do that. If you decide to take the plunge, let me know, and I'll go over the mechanics of it. It's straightforward."

"I will, I promise. Are you and John still working on the book? Are you making progress? I haven't asked John about it recently."

He hesitated to reply, and his tone was sad. "Yes, we will very soon. I put a hold on it until we could get back together. We started it together, and I felt we should finish it together. I've really missed him being around and working on it with him."

The sincere comment surprised her, and she frowned. "You haven't worked on it since the accident?"

"No. We've spoken little since then. Everything just halted until he called me the other day."

"Julie? John hasn't done anything except put up with me and work in the office?"

"That's correct."

“Oh, wow! Well, he will soon be back with you on that project, Ralph. I don’t want him chained in bed with me.”

Virginia cleared her throat, and her face grew serious. “When I told you that your writing would get someone killed before, I never thought it would happen. I want you to know that I don’t hold Jolene’s death against you. You did the right thing, and evil circumstances led up to the tragic end. I blamed you at first, but I no longer do, so don’t hold it against yourself, either. Go ahead with your goal of being nationally syndicated and let the bad memories fade. Okay?”

“Beautifully put, Virginia. Thank you, and good night. Take care of yourself, and I’ll be back soon to see you.” He moved to the bed and kissed her cheek.

Julie moved to sit on the bed. “Is that true?” she asked.

“About Jolene? Yes. I couldn’t get the picture of her on the porch steps with the lifeless drooping face out of my mind for a long time. And it hurt each time my mind would replay it. I imagine what it did to Paula, the gaping bleeding hole in her chest and her lifeless expression. That was two minutes of pure hell unleashed. I blamed everyone except George McNaulty. The whole thing lies entirely on his shoulders. Ralph killed no one.”

“Good deal, sweet thing. I was curious about that, but I wanted you to get to it if it still lingered inside your head. Did you know that Jolene wasn’t Paula’s mother?”

Virginia’s eyes widened. “What? Seriously? No, I didn’t. How’s that possible. Who told you that?”

“Paula. Sometime in the future, when I’m done with it, ask her and let her tell you about it. It’s a very moving story about how Jolene entered her life.”

“Okay. Can you send John up to see me for a few minutes? I need to set him free.”

Julie did not move.

Virginia laughed at the concerned expression. “No, not that way. “I want to set him free from this bed and house. I need to do that for him.”

Julie kissed her forehead. “You’re doing fine, honey. Don’t rush too much, or too fast. Take it slow and gradual. Take time to stabilize yourself on each step.”

“Yes, my darling husband.”

John replaced Julie shortly.

“Honey, I’m sorry for being such a weight on your shoulders. Ralph told me that all work has ceased on your book project. You go back and do that. I don’t want to tie you down forever. You still need to function in the world.”

“Thank you, love. What do you think of Ralph’s proposal?”

“I think I’ll try it. I never thought of doing anything like that, but why not? He said I might even get paid for doing it too.

“I’ll try to hold myself together this way, honey. I’ll try to cope with myself and not burden you. I know I’ll be much nicer to live with this way. I’m working on it.”

“I know you are. Take your time and do it right.”

“No apologies for not letting me die?”

“None, not then, not now, not ever. Your life is a given, not a variable. You had to live then as you do now.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear you say that. But don’t let me get away with so much crap. I’m a woman and, I can handle the word, no. I can also handle a spanking. Just blister my backside when I get unruly.”

“Your laughter is delicious to hear, my love. I’ll see you later. I need to review a client’s case before we go to court in the morning.”

Alone in the room, Virginia closed her eyes and prayed. “God, let me become as strong as John. I need to become as strong as I’m pretending in the shift of emotions that I’ve experienced. There are still billions of adjustments to make, and I’ll have to do them all with my mind instead of my body. It’s not going to be easy, but with You around, it can’t be impossible. Watch over John and the children. They need to love each other. Let me enjoy them as much as I can and thank You for giving them to me. Let me become worthy of their love and keep me inside Your love always so that I can live, really live. Amen.”

*

Jeff stood in the kitchen door and hugged Julie. “What are you going to do? Curl up on the sofa with *The Dream Book*, curl up in bed with me, or curl up with the book, naked, while I play with your body?”

Julie laughed. “Some choices. How about all the above?”

“You don’t think I’ll do it, do you?” he challenged.

“Oh, I believe you’ll do it, love. I’ll also bet that within five minutes or less, I will lose my place in the book. I’ll read the same sentence twelve times, until I throw the book across the room, and involve myself.”

She did not bother with the book but afterward she dreamed.

Julie walked along the road that led to the old lighthouse on Port Mahon, near Little Creek, Delaware. There was a distinct difference for the beach was not eroded and the lighthouse was still in excellent condition and operating, not gone. Its polished mirrors shot the light beam into the dimming sky to warn the ships of the looming coast. As she approached the building, she noticed two people sitting under a tree, holding hands, and looking toward the ocean. She had intended to go inside the tower, but she changed directions, and stood before them to let them inspect her. She realized she needed their approval before she could continue.

“Continue what?” she asked herself. She shook her head and stood under their gaze.

“Hello,” the woman spoke. She wore a brown skirt and white cotton blouse. She had her hair tied back with a yellow handkerchief.

“You doubt,” the man said. “Do you still doubt?”

Julie looked puzzled.

The woman stood and grasped Julie’s hands. “Patience, Julie,” she said.

“She’s a beauty, Nathan,” she commented to the man. Then, she tried to touch Julie’s face, and Julie cringed away.

“Do not fear,” the woman said and caught Julie’s chin. “You are closer to the truth than you think. The Lines of Demarcation are moving, and they have encompassed you, my golden beauty. You are caught, and you will shine as pure as white gold. The Virginia Roses will reverently speak your name for centuries to come. You are the White Rose of Salvation.”

Julie closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to rid herself of the dazed feeling. When she opened her eyes, the lighthouse was gone and so were the couple.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

John made the appointment with Principal Martin and found Julie's impression accurate.

He spoke clearly after the returned senseless diatribe.

"Mr. Martin, I don't believe what I'm hearing. Can you honestly believe that if you let Paula take classes at home, other students will let their father rape them so they can do the same thing? You must think that the children here are really morons or very stupid."

"Mr. Bennington, I appreciate your concern, but if you'd like to run the school then you can get yourself hired."

"You appreciate my concern? I don't think you do, but you soon will because I will go to the press with this story. You are responsible for ensuring the community's educational resources are available for all the students in your district. In this case, you are not. You are depriving Paula Anderson's right to an education. Instead, you would rather hurt her by making her attend classes and knowing she'll fail. You know what she has suffered and is only now beginning to deal with the grief of seeing her mother and brother shot to death and Virginia's serious injury. Maybe you don't think that should impact her, but you must be devoid of all human emotion if you don't."

"I think you should rather consider the impact of letting the entire community know how much you detest the education process and how unsympathetic and uncaring you are about human life. You can help another human being in trouble, and you won't. You have already discredited yourself in front of Julie Morrison and your four teachers, who are willing to donate their time and help. Now you want to let the whole community know. You must be a glutton for punishment."

"Mr. Bennington."

John held up his hands. "Spare me. I've also sent a letter to the Department of Education at the State Office, explaining basically the same things that I said to you. You deal with students here that are going to be leaders someday. Can you tell them that hardheadedness and lack of compassion are the best way to mold the youths that will look up to them in the future? You need to take a vacation and rethink the values you want to possess and display to the students and community in this position. Your job is to provide students with educational opportunities, not judge whether they will want to be raped to stay home. Does that make sense?"

Martin sat silent for a few moments, rehashing what John had said. "Very well put, Mr. Bennington. You sent a letter to Mr. Schaffer?"

"I certainly did. You'll get a copy soon because I courtesy copied you. It's my right as a citizen."

Martin nodded. "Well, I've rethought the matter of Paula Anderson, and I'll agree with the recommendation of the teachers, Julie Morrison, and you. However, I hope that you understand that other students will try to achieve the same thing once a thing like this happens, regardless of the reason. That was the basis of my decision not to torture Paula."

"Then you must be strong and deal with the fakers, instead of harming one person who doesn't deserve it."

*

Julie and Paula were happy and pleased that John had succeeded where they had failed. Paula went to the bedroom with Dozen and Jacob.

“Did you treat him as you did, Madeline?” Julie asked.

“Relax, dear. I was very diplomatic about it. I just argued with him like I was in court, explaining my pleas to the jury. It got the point across, and he yielded. So, Ralph won’t print the story he would have.”

She chuckled and relaxed. “That’s wonderful. This will also be a big help for Paula and Virginia.”

“Speaking of which,” she continued, “when is her next appointment with the neurosurgeons?”

“Three weeks from now. They said they will try to do the testing in one day and let her come home. It might go that way now that she is talking and at least seems to be interested in life.” He sat at the table and heaved a great sigh.

“You’ve done that so often since I’ve been here, John. Don’t you tire of it?”

“Yes. Virginia Rose One kept telling me I had to be strong, like the ocean. I just didn’t realize how strong the ocean really is. People tell me I’m strong. I guess they don’t know how many times I’d have loved to be weak and leave, go away and wipe out the memories with alcohol or just burn out on LSD, anything. Being strong is real torture sometimes. It sucks. It’s the pits.”

“I understand completely. In this field, if you care, you must be strong. If not, they’ll walk all over you and pin you down to where you can’t help them, no matter how much you want to. Virginia almost broke me that night before, finally realizing she had something to live for. You don’t know the times that I’ve cried for her, but I sure did.”

She stood behind him and massaged his shoulders as she told him of her dream about Port Mahon.

“The Lines of Demarcation caught you? The White Rose of Salvation?” he asked absently. “I’ve heard or read those terms before. Yes, the Lines of Demarcation was on the daybed in the basement. She said they would soon merge, and the pain would be devastating when it hit her. I wish that I could be smart enough to learn what it means before it happens. That way, maybe, I could stop it.”

“Maybe you weren’t meant to understand it in time. Maybe she just told you to be strong for what she knew would happen. Like you weren’t to interfere, just pick up the pieces after the fact. Does that make sense? I confused myself.”

“Yes. I understand what you said. I don’t like it, but there’s nothing to do about it now. If I could’ve stopped George McNulty, Jolene and Steve would be alive now. But, more importantly, Virginia Rose wouldn’t be in her bed right now.”

He yawned. “I don’t know. I sometimes guess we aren’t supposed to interfere in some things.”

“Enough of the depressions. When are you going out to work with Ralph Watson?”

“When do you think it will be okay?”

“You decide. I’ll be here most of the time anyway, so it’s no problem.”

He studied her and realized she had stared at the tabletop since she sat down. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t you have your husband come and spend time with you here? I look at you as family now. Therefore, I should include him so you can keep a good marriage going. I appreciate what you’ve done and feel you’ve overextended yourself. You might be used to this and be strong, but you’re also a woman and a human being. So, he’s welcome anytime to make life easier for you. Will that work?”

Tears dribbled when she raised her face. "Thank you, John, and bless you. You're wonderful. "Sometimes, I get dedicated to a cause and can't break away as I should. But things will get easier for Virginia and you soon. It's hard on Jeff when I do this. He keeps himself occupied, but he does get stressed out at times. I sometimes forget that he needs my attention, also. People like Virginia need it more. Thanks.

"You might want to talk with him also. He might be of assistance with the research end of your book with Ralph. It might do him good to get involved if you think he could help."

"I'll do that," he said. "When is the first meeting here for the teachers?"

"Saturday morning at 11:00 a.m.," she called from the stairs.

*

Saturday brought some perfect weather for autumn, and the teachers came and waited for Julie's arrival. They had met her briefly at school and showed interest in knowing her, what she could do for Paula, and her credentials. Paula thought the teachers' concern for her was unreal. John thought it was a good thing to happen; it was justice served without the hassle of a court order.

Julie entered with Jeff and viewed the people around the dining room table. The math teacher, Mr. Daniels, watched her intently again like he had seen her before. Then, after she introduced Jeff, he spoke up.

"I've seen you somewhere before, Mrs. Morrison."

"You saw me at the school."

"No, it was somewhere else. I know it." He closed his eyes, and his face grew very intense. He snapped his fingers. "Yes! You were Candice in *The Edge of Healing* film. That's it; you were Candice! You're really Kristi Mallow!"

Julie looked perplexed, and Jeff smiled casually. "You got caught, honey. Don't worry about it. They'll forget after a time."

Julie called up one of her acting moods and turned. "Okay, Lester, since you insist on living this fantasy of yours, I will confess to what I do," she said with a sultry voice.

She held a pen from Jeff's pocket like a cigarette. Then, she walked provocatively across the dining room and dropped to her knees before Daniels' chair.

"You're suffering from delusions, darling," she sighed and puffed on her pen cigarette and placed it on an invisible ash tray.

"When I leave you alone here, I'm with patients who are coming down from cocaine, heroin, or some other drug they can use. They are the other men that you insist are my lovers. They can't compare to you, for they are young and have messed up their minds. I don't appreciate your jealousy over them. I'm not into child abuse or seduction.

"You, and only you, possess my love and my life. It's you who touches both my heart and my body. Just you, love. You need to understand that. No other man alive has done that, and that's the way I like it. One man's fingerprints on my skin, one man in my bed. One man stroking my heart and body. You've got me, and you're all I can handle, lover."

She put her arms around him and kissed him passionately. "Is that the way I did it in the movie?"

"No! This is better! Candice didn't come into the audience in the movie and kiss me. That was great. Thanks."

“No problem. To answer the next question so we can move on to Paula, I’m here doing this because I sincerely love doing this. No fame, fortune, reporters, cameras, thousand-dollar-a-plate dinners, television commercials, or magazine layouts. I love helping people recover from shattered lives. That was my first movie, and I did that off the screen after that. Now, let’s talk about Paula.”

Sabob Daniels recovered from the event and spoke. “We know you’re registered with the State of Delaware. What is your area of expertise?”

“The area in which I have the most extensive training is in Addictive Drugs Counseling and Rehabilitation. In that area, I can do anything that is required, including in-patient therapy. The secondary field is Psychological Counseling and Rehabilitation for general mental health problems. I also have minor degrees in Physical Rehabilitation and am a licensed Social Worker for many case types. The only things I can’t involve myself in are deeply disturbed cases like schizophrenia, manic depression, etc.

“The main concentration is getting teenagers off drugs and cleaning up their lives. That brings me the income to keep my life running. The rest is different. I work to help people, like pulling Virginia Rose from her pit of depression and restoring her to a functional life. Like helping Paula overcome the grief of her family being slaughtered and all the deep pain of sexual abuse. Those things I do for free because deep inside me, I truly love helping people. That irritates some people because I do it for free. But I can’t help them with that. I love helping people almost as much as I love life.”

Jeff cleared his throat and spoke up. “I’ll verify that. She loves helping people sometimes more than she loves me. She would probably have to live alone if I wasn’t the man I am. I know her, and I accept her fully. Otherwise, we wouldn’t make it. Her devotion to patients is only limited by her physical limitations, which are very strong.”

“Thanks, Jeff. That’s sweet.”

“Next question?” she asked the group.

“No questions,” Daniels said as the other heads shook. “I sort of feel stupid for asking that one.”

Julie smiled. “I’m sorry if I made you feel bad. But I have to be honest. I hate lying.”

She turned her attention to John and Paula, who listened to her talk with admiration. “Does Virginia know about the teachers?” she asked.

John looked at Paula, and they both denied it.

“Okay, I want all of you, one at a time, to come upstairs to Virginia’s bedroom. Please tell her who you are and what you’re doing for Paula. Give me five minutes, and then you can start. Thanks for coming and your acceptance.”

“Where did you find her, John?” Daniels asked.

John thought a moment. “You know, I never asked how she came to show up here the first time. She was so good and professional and made so much progress on the first night that I simply accepted the fact she should be here. I’ll have to ask her sometime.”

*

The curtains and windows were open when Ralph came to see Virginia in the afternoon.

“Well, Virginia, you look better today in the sunlight.”

“I feel better too.”

“Have you given thought to the idea of being my guest writer?”

"I have, and I think I'll try it. How will I handle the tape recorder?"

"Well, I thought that Paula might be of assistance in that matter. She can turn the recorder on or off when you're ready. All you have to do is think of the subject."

"I can deal with that. Will the paper pay me? I won't take money from you."

"That remains to be seen. For the first few, I'll provide the payment from my salary. The editor said he'll pay if the readers like your writing. He said he'll come up with fifty percent of the rate for me and take it from there. Maybe someday you'll be up there with your own column."

She laughed richly. "Yeah, right."

"Also, the people at the newspaper office have decided to help you a little. They found a way for you to regain contact with the world. Would you like that?"

"Regain contact with the world? How?"

"They've ordered a special phone which will allow you to contact people instead of relying on them to come to you. The demonstration looked great, so I hope it serves you well."

"That's great," she said. "Who thought of that?"

Ralph shrugged. "I don't really know. Does it really matter?"

"No. Thank you very much. That was very thoughtful."

"Well, I'm going to the basement to visit John and this Jeff fellow. I'll bring a recorder to Paula on Monday, and you start thinking and composing."

*

When Julie prepared to leave that night, John walked her to her car. "Julie, who sent you to Virginia for the first time?"

Julie stopped in the act of opening her door and stared at him. She could detect the curiosity and doubt in his voice.

"Does it really matter? You know my qualifications, and you've made no negative comments about my methods. Can't you accept my doing this for love and let it go?"

"I'm sorry. I never really thought of it until the teachers were here this morning. I won't complain about you. How could I after what you've done so far? I was just curious. Doing research on the Virginia Roses and being a lawyer has me asking questions all the time."

Julie relaxed with the change in his voice. "I could tell you many more things, John. There's much more ahead of us, and it has nothing to do with who sent me. I could tell you, but I'd rather not. I don't like to betray the trust and promises I make to others. It's all for your Virginia Rose, so let it suffice now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Are you sure we can afford this?” Julie asked again and gulped at the thought of risking so much money. She lay on the sofa in their basement, her heart racing, her stomach churning.

Jeff sat beside her and caught the hands twirling her hair and drumming on her stomach. “Hey, love, we can afford this, and we’ve been through it enough. If what you say is right, then we’ll be reimbursed. If not, then we bite it. But, sometimes, you must risk something when you know you’re right. True, six thousand dollars is difficult to lay out, but it won’t hurt us that much or for that long if we lose.”

She sighed. “Do I look nervous?”

He laughed and kissed her fingertips. “No, you look as calm as a rock, my darling.”

“All right. Then I’ll stay that way until the testing is over and then I’ll faint.”

“Sounds like a good plan.”

*

The next day, with a \$6000.00 Certified Check tucked in her purse, Julie went to Virginia’s house. She helped John with her and went to the hospital. John left them there and went to work.

“First step is the CAT Scan,” said Dr. Morgan. “We’ll have that done, and by that time, Mr. Carlton should be here.”

“Who’s that?” asked Virginia.

Dr. Morgan looked at Julie for a lead. Julie gave none.

“Well, Dr. Carlton is a specialist in nerves and nerve damage. He’s researching the spinal column and the physical response to electrical stimulation. He’s going to run some tests on you,” Dr. Morgan explained.

Virginia grew wary instantly. “This wasn’t part of the plan. What’s going on?”

“Dr. Carlton was my idea,” Julie spoke up. “Since I’ve started working with and loving you, I’ve been researching this kind of injury. I was not too fond of the information I read. But I want to improve the odds if I can. It won’t hurt you, and the information may help you and other paralyzed people in the future. Trust me, I won’t allow more damage. Virginia Rose One would have my head if I did.”

“She’s communicating with you too. Why not me? I’m in the bloodlines.”

“Because you’re not like the other Roses,” Julie said, following the bed down the hallway. “I don’t know what’s different. I know that there’s a huge fuss for you to live. That’s why John and I are here. I’m your director, and we’ll do as many takes as necessary until we get the scene right. This is all for you, babe. You will be the one to make the change in future roses.”

“Okay. I accepted your offer, and I will abide by the agreement we made. I’ll trust you, but I reserve the right to be scared.”

Dr. Morgan started the CAT Scan and before he finished, an orderly announced Dr. Carlton’s arrival.

Julie met him and watched apprehensively as the tiny man supervised the unloading of the equipment with meticulous care. She thought of him like a mother hen, caring for his chicks. His trimmed mustache and goatee gave him the appearance of an assured individual. She greeted him, and he turned to respond.

“Good morning, Mrs. Morrison; I’m here and on time. I hope this isn’t a waste of time. They usually are.”

Julie handed him the check. “Then why are you here? You could have refused my offer and request.”

His nose and mouth twitched. “At first, I ignored the letter you wrote. However, the thought of Virginia Rose kept arising, and I couldn’t rest until I replied positively.”

He looked exasperated and sighed heavily. “When I started this research, I thought it might lead somewhere; now I’m no longer positive, for I’ve had so few positive results. It won’t be long before I stop writing the papers, file the report and let it rest. Still, I’m here today.”

“Well, don’t give up yet. Virginia Rose is a special case for me, and I don’t give up easily. I have enough confidence in your research to put up the six thousand. Who knows? Maybe I can be of assistance to you.”

His mouth twitched again. “If you say so. Where do I set up my equipment?”

Julie led him to Virginia’s room. He supervised the setup in the same manner as the unloading. She stepped outside the building for a few minutes of solitude, wondering if she had made a mistake and if his attention to Virginia would be as great. Then the thoughts of Virginia’s strong willpower were shoved to the front of her mind.

“This is going to be a long day,” she prayed.

“God, please stay with me. I’m going to need Your strength for this. Don’t let her snap out and become argumentative or quit. Amen.”

Within the hour, Virginia arrived in the room. Before the attendants turned her face down on the exam bed, Dr. Carlton introduced himself and talked with her.

“What I’m going to do here is stimulate the nerve chains that control the muscles of your legs, feet, hands, and arms. I will do that to see if they will respond to electric pulses. I’ll also try the same procedure in the reverse direction. That should make your mind feel like the arms or legs are moving. The theory is that doing that will help the nerves heal independently. So, the process will not harm you or cause more damage.”

“Okay, Doc,” Virginia said. “Go ahead and wire me up.”

Julie closely observed the team as they attached straps and wires to Virginia’s legs, arms, and back. They turned on the equipment when they finished, and Dr. Carlton assumed control. She scrutinized everything he did and where he used the probes for the stimulation points. Unfortunately, Virginia’s body did not respond as he had hoped. She frowned and closed her eyes as she ran the procedure inside her mind’s video room.

“How much voltage are you using?” she asked.

“Point one millivolt,” he answered curtly.

“Why don’t you put the probes closer to the spinal column?”

“Are you questioning my competence?” he snapped. The forty-five minutes of no responses clearly irritated him. “I have a master’s degree in neurosurgery, and I’m close to a doctorate. So, what do you have over me?”

Julie opened her eyes, held her temper and spoke calmly. “I’m not challenging your competence, education, or capabilities. What I’m questioning is the voltage setting and the position of the probes. I feel that you’re very close to what you want to accomplish, but you haven’t set up the proper lines of demarcation.”

His face reddened. “Then maybe you’d better leave!”

“There’s no need for that response, sir. You’re not being rational. Just try a different position, angle, and voltage setting. That’s all I’m suggesting.”

His mouth twitched and he breathed deeply. "Missus Morrison, the voltage is sufficient to get the response. I've used it in tests on people under anesthesia and it works. I've also used the positions of probes and it works. The lack of response is probably severe nerve damage or atrophy, and it doesn't matter."

"You're very wrong. The problem is that you've been using the settings on real muscles that worked moments before the patient went to sleep or was knocked out with drugs. You might have to tweak the volts up a little to stimulate a nerve chain that's been dormant for months or years. The same goes for the reverse process of the brain receiving the response. Also, maybe you must get closer to the area where the connection normally happens. That place is in the spinal column."

Dr. Morgan intervened. "Julie, I think that a neurosurgeon of his prominence should know what he's talking about. After all, your area is rehabilitation and..."

"And a success in this kind of research would make the pain of my job much easier, Dr. Morgan. You repair their bodies or not and they go home. I must deal with the rest of it, doctor. I'm not trying to step on anyone or disprove, or discredit anyone's knowledge. I want this test to be successful. Why are you both so blind to that? I want her to get up off the bed and walk again. Isn't that the goal?"

She looked at Dr. Carlton, who appeared unmoved by her speech.

"Will you just try it? Please?"

He handed the probes to her. "You're the one in charge here. It's your money and your patient. When you damage her, it's also your responsibility." He folded his arms and watched her stoically.

"You need some rehabilitation in English comprehension, Doctor Carlton. I didn't want this to become a battle of the sexes or you by having your proud male ego bruised by a woman, but so be it. It's all on your shoulders because you can't understand that I WANT you to succeed."

Virginia snapped. "Will you two stop this? What the hell am I, a guinea pig, or a person?"

"I'm finished," said Dr. Carlton. "Your life's in her hands now."

"You pig headed," started Julie and then stopped herself.

Julie regained her composure quickly. "Virginia, will you give me permission to do this? I know what I saw and what I've been told. Let me do this, not only for you, but so Dr. Carlton can understand what I'm saying."

"It's not too late," said Dr. Carlton. "You can stop this senseless proceeding."

Virginia sighed. "The pawn says to the knight, yield to the queen. I uphold the agreement, Julie, do it. However, know that if I could move, I'd slap the both of you silly."

Julie smiled. "Well said, Virginia. I'll stand in line, men first."

She held her hands together and looked toward the ceiling.

"God, I submit my hands to You. Use them and guide them with the preciseness I was shown in the dream. Let the Lines of Demarcation be set with Your infinite Wisdom and let Thy will be done here today. Amen."

She laid the probing devices on Virginia's back, pressed her fingers against the spine and counted the vertebrae down to the place she wanted. She picked up one probe, willed her hands to be steady and inserted the thin needle into the flesh. She stopped and looked at one technician.

"Point two millivolts, please," she requested.

She pressed the tiny switch on the probe, and nothing happened. She moved the probe yet closer to the spine and did it again. Virginia's right leg twitched.

"Give me point three," she said and pressed the switch again.

Virginia's right leg bent at the knee and moved upward.

Dr. Carlton stared at the rising limb.

Virginia gasped. "I felt that! My right leg did something."

Julie continued and swiftly found the correct nerves with ease. She got a response from a different muscle on each probe, but she did not always get a feeling response from Virginia. She finally stopped and laid the probes aside.

"Your research is accurate and worthwhile, Dr. Carlton. All it needed was some fine tuning. Continue your tests, and stop being such an ass. I think the results of this Virginia Rose will keep the funds coming and you will achieve your goal."

"I'm sorry, Missus Morrison. I feel like a whipped puppy, and I deserve it. I'll try to change in the future and thank you for your help. I appreciate that."

"Don't worry about it," she smiled. "You can't fight the power of God when He wants something to happen."

"And don't fight the power of the pantyhose," he mumbled to himself.

"Dr. Morgan, will you get Virginia dressed and ready to go home?" Julie asked. "I'm going to go and call John."

She paused in the doorway to listen to Virginia.

"Dr. Morgan, I haven't asked before because I didn't care about living, but what about the rest of me? Did everything else in the operations turn out well? Did you remove any parts? Did you put anything artificial inside me to keep me going?"

Julie clasped her hands together. "Thank you, God," she whispered. "You are good and understanding. Without You, I would be nothing to these people."

*

John and Julie got Virginia situated in the bed again as Julie talked to John about the tests and what she hoped to accomplish for Virginia. John was pleased with the results, and so was Virginia.

"Julie, I know they have adjustable beds and things that would help me. Can they be procured through the insurance company?" Virginia asked.

Julie beamed. "Yes, love. That's good news to hear. We'll check into that next week."

"Also, the television, John. It doesn't have to be a large one. A tiny one will work fine."

"Okay, honey. I still have to go back to the office and meet with one client. I'll be done at five o'clock and then I'll take care of the television."

Paula joined them with a package. "This came from Ralph Watson. He dropped it off earlier, apologizing for the delay."

Julie set the unit on the night stand and connected the wiring. Next, she attached the switching unit to the bed frame, and Virginia inspected it.

"How does it work?" she asked excitedly.

"Well, it says that all you have to do is touch the red button and the machine will do the rest," said Julie.

"What do it touch it with?"

Julie laughed. "How about your nose?" she suggested.

"My nose?" She moved her head and pressed the red switch with the tip of her nose.

The machine clicked and a feminine voice spoke. "Number please?"

Virginia giggled. "What now?"

"Come on," Julie said. "Tell it a number."

"Seven, three, four, oh, oh, two, two," said Virginia.

The machine whirled and clicked. "Incorrect digits and pitch," the voice said. "Please adjust the pitch knob one notch to the right."

Julie did that and told her to use zero instead of oh.

Virginia repeated the process, and the machine gave out a series of tones and the speaker made a ringing noise.

"Hello, Chadworth, Millington, Burris, and Bennington. How may I help you?" came a voice.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. John Bennington."

"Who is this?" the woman asked. "Is this Virginia?"

"Yes, Shirley. It's been a long time since I heard your voice."

"Likewise. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. Is John there?"

"Yes, and he's not busy. The last client canceled. Do you know he still has the thank you card on the wall by his desk?"

"No, I didn't. That's sweet."

"Okay, I'll put you through now."

"Hello, John," said Virginia a moment later. "I just wanted to call and say I love you. Is that alright?"

"Of course, it is, silly goose. It sounds strange, but pleasant to hear your voice on the phone. Welcome home."

She sniffled. "Will you sleep with me tonight?"

"Of course, Virginia. I'd be happy to do that."

"How do you shut it off?" she asked.

"Hit the button again," Julie told her.

Virginia did that and asked Paula to leave them alone for a few moments.

"Why did you do that at the hospital? All that probing wasn't all concerned with the muscles in my arms and legs. Why?" she asked, trying to convey her distress and sound angry.

Julie shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. I did as Doctor Carlton did, just in different locations. What's wrong?"

"I think that was very rude," Virginia said as harshly as she could.

Julie smiled. "Really? What did I do?"

"Stop it!" Virginia insisted.

Julie laughed then. "Okay, love. Maybe you think it's rude, but I don't and neither does Virginia Rose One. Okay? Who knows what will happen from this stimulation? I must have hit some good nerves to make you angry."

"You did, twerp! It felt like I was having a baby under mild anesthesia."

"Just wanted to know if it would still work," Julie said and laughed again.

Virginia joined her. "You're so bad, girlfriend. I could've killed you then. You should be glad that I couldn't move."

Julie calmed down, wiped the tears from her face and then did the same for Virginia. "Sorry. Are you still angry?"

"No. Just don't do that again, without warning. You're still bad and I'll have to watch you."

"You do that, love," Julie said. "Get out of your bed and watch me. Get even with me. I'd love that."

*

“It feels strange being here again,” John answered Virginia’s question. “It feels like we’re dating again.”

Virginia sighed. “That’s one thing I miss. I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t worry about it and don’t bring it up again. We’ll just date like we did before. Can you handle that?”

“Yes. Can you?”

“I haven’t died from lack of sex. I’ll survive. If you can survive all the pain you did, I don’t think this will bother me.”

“Okay, love,” she said. “My face still has feelings.”

John kissed her several times around her face and neck.

“Someday, before I’m too old, I want to have another baby, lover,” she told him after he shut off the lights.

“You do?”

“Definitely, as soon as I’m out of this bed, and before if I can’t be.”

After a moment, John replied. “If that’s what you want, then that’s what you get.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Paula's adjustment worked well and her first three tests at the school were 94 and above. The results pleased the teachers; even the principal thought it was excellent. She began to sit with Virginia Rose and read the newspaper to her. "Here we go, Virginia," she reported one day. "This one is your initial column."

"In my column this week, I am starting a series of articles and essays written by a close friend of mine, Virginia Rose Bennington. I hope you find them as informative and pleasing as I do.

AFTER THE PHYSICAL PAIN COMES THE MENTAL

Hello, I'm Virginia Rose Bennington. A few months ago, I was shot in the back. When I fell, I landed in a flower bed with a lovely white wooden picket fence for a border. The pickets jammed into my stomach and chest. The entire shooting spree lasted only two minutes and left a lifelong friend, her son, and her ex-husband dead. It left me in tremendous pain, more than I ever considered a human could experience and still live. Unfortunately, it did not stop there. Over the next hour, along with the pain, most of my body gradually went numb and I was totally paralyzed from the neck down. Everything stopped except the stomach and chest. That would happen later, after the operations to save my life.

I wanted to die. I screamed and begged for death, but when you cannot move, there is little you can do to stop anything. The terror inside my mind was worse than the physical pain I felt. There was no way to run and hide from what was forced on me. I could not commit suicide, slash my wrists, overdose on medicine, nothing. You cannot end your life through starvation, for feeding tubes and IVs will be inserted to save you. Can you even imagine the incredible pressure on your mind, knowing that you will never be able to feel your body again? Knowing that you cannot touch your children or feel their touch at any time? Learning that you can do nothing, blow your nose, rid yourself of pesky flies, eat absolutely nothing without depending on someone else? Knowing that you must become totally dependent and submissive to live?

I did, and my mind swiftly crashed. It caved in, and I became nothing in record time. I did not speak a word unless it was necessary to anyone around me. I let my mind build thick, rugged walls around me where I was secure. I held the attention of those around me and had to do nothing. With my silence, I crippled my entire family and eliminated all my friends. I effectively killed them with quiet and immobility. What did I feel? Nothing. I felt nothing, no remorse, no sorrow. Why should I since they could not move away from my bed and the wall around us?

"That was a few months ago. Since then, I've learned that I can live without moving. I can enjoy my family without walking, touching, cooking, etc. They are still with me, and I thank God for the therapist who broke the walls down and left me stranded and depending on myself. It's difficult to compare the terror of not moving and feeling to the terror of dying alone in the dark. If not for her, I might have gotten my wish for those around me to suffer forever for letting me live. That was not very nice of me, and I'm glad of the intervention. I want to live; I want to love; I want to learn. She has opened the doors for me to do that.

"I write this, hoping that it might touch someone who has or knows someone who has experienced this. If it happened to you, then keep the faith that you can still be of benefit to the world. You can still enjoy your husband, wife, and family. You can learn anything you wish. All it takes is some adjustments, inside your mind. Do not lay there and destroy all that is good for

you, including yourself. If it happened to someone else, be firm with them. Do not let yourself be chained to the bed with them. Set yourself free and help them at the same time. If you love them and care for them, intervene.

“Once more, I thank God, my husband, my family, and Julie Morrison for pulling Virginia Rose from the jaws of death and restoring me to life. Thank you.”

“Well, Virginia, I do think you’ll be a success. You were that scared?”

“More than scared. When Julie walked out that night, I felt sure I would die, just from the fear that overwhelmed me. She gave me what I wanted, and I couldn’t handle it.”

“Sort of like when Steve walked out with John and slammed the door. Maybe yours was more intense though.”

“Enough of this! That’s enough negatives for now.”

Paula folded the paper and laid it on the corner of the bed.

“How’s studying and your education going? You’ve not confided recently.”

“It’s going well, thank you. I think I’ll be able to graduate with my class. It’s been a rough time for me. I wanted so much to come to you, but something just held me away.”

“Hey, Paula, don’t worry about it. If it’s on your mind, say it. Don’t lock it away to spare me; I can take it.”

Paula sighed and stared at the wall. “What’s on my mind now, I don’t understand. I’ve had a few dreams; lately that bother me. Usually, I only wake up and don’t remember them, just the feeling that they were bad ones. The last one was clear, though, and I remember it well. A woman wearing the same clothes that you married in, came to my bed. She told me that I would become clean and pure and that in no way would I ever create anything evil. She said that it would happen, because of you, and for you. She said that, uh, through the relict and the white rose; all the restricting lines of Demarcation will be removed, and the love of all Virginia Roses will join in a fiery display to heal the broken Virginia Rose, which is you.”

She stopped speaking and regarded Virginia. “Do you understand all that?”

Virginia shook her head. “No, I don’t. Sometimes, I feel that I should never have let John take the diaries. I thought they were causing him to have the dreams and to behave like he did. Now, I don’t know. You and Julie hadn’t read them. Perhaps I’m causing it. Maybe I’m a psychic or something. I should have been more attentive to what my mother taught me.”

Paula shook her head. “I’ve listened when John and Ralph talked sometimes. They don’t think it’s an accident that you are not like the rest of the Virginias in the diaries. They think it’s intentional, but they don’t know why.”

Virginia sighed. “Let’s stop this line of conversation for the moment. It bothers me.”

“Do you want me to bring the children, or do you want to watch television?”

“Right now, I’d rather take a nap.”

Paula stood and rested a hand on Virginia’s forehead. “I’ve been meaning to ask this for a while now, will you do something for me?”

“What do you want, dear? Talk to me.”

“When you regain some control of your arms, will you go back to your drawings?”

Virginia stared at her curiously. “Okay. I’d like that. Continue.”

“This time, however, concentrate on cartooning and creating a comic strip about Jolene. Let the people know what it’s like to live like we did. I want people to understand the pain we all felt. I want it to hurt them to the bone. And if the courts don’t like it, let them suffer the same pain.”

Virginia was flabbergasted. For the moment, she could not imagine doing anything like that with her body. Yet, she could also read the intensity behind Paula's request and statement, which moved her deeply.

When she could, she spoke softly. "That's a profound and thoughtful request. If I can do it, I will, even if I must do it through someone else. That was a touching statement. You got it." She shook her head to clear the feeling away.

When the bedroom door closed, Virginia chose a spot on the ceiling, stared at it until her vision dimmed, closed her eyes, and prayed. "God, this is unsettling, and I seem defenseless to stop it. I don't like being outside all the time, with people knowing me and knowing my past when I don't know myself. I feel helpless as it is, and this only compounds the perception. Is it possible for me to stop being a Virginia Rose? If I change my name to maybe Harriet Ruth Bennington or something, non-special, would this stop? It frightens me, and I lay here, powerless to stop it alone. Please help. Amen."

She stopped, and her eyes burned as she cried herself to sleep. She dreamed as John and Julie did.

Virginia Rose stood on the side of a mountain, near the top. Below and in front of her, grew millions of flowers. There were small trees close to her and tall trees, rising, in the distance, until the clouds obscured the tops. A breeze from the valley below carried the perfume of the combined flowers and pine trees. The air was thick and sweet, regardless of the draft that was strong enough to blow her hair around.

She watched the woman approach and walk among the flowers from her left until she faced her. The once gentle face now looked stern, and Virginia could not turn her face away.

With a voice steady and robust above the rising wind, she said, "My child, you try my patience. I said you would learn submissiveness, and you did. I will add to that the final piece, and you will learn that also. That is self-discipline. You will have all choices removed from you if you do not learn on your own. I suggest you cease your rebellious nature and embrace life principles with fervor. This must end. You were given life for this purpose, and you are a given. One way or another, you will do what is required when the Lines of Demarcation are released. If you do not, I pity you." She held Virginia's face in her hands. The hands were hot against her chilled skin. "You wish to question me?"

"Only one question," Virginia said meekly.

"What is it?"

"Why must I be on the outside and not know what other people know about you and me and other things in the past?"

The woman's face softened then. "Because if you were NOT protected, you would do all within your power to prevent it. You ARE protected because you must not stop it. All things will be released to you within the last minutes of the fierce battle. So have no fear and discipline yourself so that you will not cause yourself to suffer further."

Virginia Rose lowered her gaze to the ground. "Yes, Virginia Rose One."

Julie woke her. "Are you dreaming, sweet thing?"

Virginia blinked and yawned. "Yes. Was I talking?"

"No, you were mumbling in your sleep. How's it going?"

"I feel just grand, girlfriend. The first column is in today's paper and that lifted my spirits. I just hope it's okay to put my feelings out in public like that."

Julie smiled. "It's better for that to be in print than having someone find some dirt and putting it on the six o'clock news. What you said was what you felt, and it will be accepted as such."

"What do we do next?" she asked, while Julie started the muscle exercises.

"What do you want to do next?"

"Get mobile," she said thoughtfully. "Also add some self-discipline to my life."

"Both statements are admirable goals."

"I guess I'd like a wheelchair now. I want to be where I can see outside the walls of the house. This bedroom is okay, but I think that some changes in environment would help me calm down sometime."

"Calm you down? Are you getting hyper?"

"You know what I mean. There might be some other distractions to keep me from the pit of depression, until I grow solid, you know?"

"I know, darling. I'm married to you and can see things others can't. But what you said is true, and I've been waiting for you to realize it and ask for it yourself. It's better to have you take part and make some decisions than for me to push you all the way. It makes the changes more solid, as you said."

Virginia's face grew pensive, and she closed her eyes.

"Want me to answer the question before you ask it?"

Virginia nodded, not opening her eyes.

"I won't leave you until you are more than solid, my friend. But, even then, I don't want to leave you. I've grown to love you, and I want us to be friends forever, whether one hundred percent restored or ten percent more than now. You're a super person, and I don't want to lose you from my life. I want us to be solid friends, until death does us part. Is that answer satisfactory to you?"

"You bet."

"That's good to hear."

"John said Dr. Carlton wants to do the testing again."

"Yes, he does. He wants to try the therapy end of it this time. Are you willing to do it?"

"Yes. That was an awesome experience before."

"It will be different this time. The stimulation will be more constant instead of the short pulses and in a controlled pattern also. He recorded the nerves that didn't give the feelings response, and he'll concentrate more on them."

"It'll work better this time," Virginia said. "Can we have a gynecologist there? I want to ask some questions about women getting pregnant while like this."

Julie stopped moving her feet. "What brought that on?"

"What you did in the hospital stayed on my mind. I've considered it, and if I don't show any signs of recovery within a year, I want to have another baby, if possible. We had started working on another one a few days before the accident."

"Wow! I never thought you would ask that. That's great. Do you feel you'll be ready for that within a year?"

"Yes. Don't ask me why, but whatever's happening to John, Paula, and you, tells me there's a change coming. You all have dreams and learn. I have a dream and get reprimanded for being rebellious. So, I'll discipline myself and let you folks lead me or take me where I need to go. Does it sound reasonable to you?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The day before Virginia's next hospital visit, she had Paula read the newspaper to her. Again, the headline story surprised her.

MARLENE Q. McNAULTY ARRESTED FOR DEATH OF HUSBAND

Wilmington - Early this morning Marlene McNaulty's home was the scene of domestic violence. The quiet and community-minded woman was arrested for the shooting death of her husband, The Honorable Walter Q. McNaulty. Judge McNaulty served on the New Castle County Superior Court bench for 21 years since his appointment. She called the police and waited calmly on the front porch steps until they arrived at the scene. His body was taken to Saint Theresa Hospital, and Marlene was taken into custody at the Gander Hill Detention Facility where she's awaiting arraignment for premeditated murder. When questioned by reporters and the police, she simply said she could not tolerate his infidelity with younger women any longer. She said rather than dragging the family name through the courts, she chose to kill him. She showed no remorse or anger. Instead, she showed signs of relief.

"Wow! That is a heavy method of divorce."

"I agree," Paula said. "John says that soon there will be no McNaultys left alive. That's a terrible thought because my father was a McNaulty. But I'm too young to die."

"You won't die. You've got many years ahead of you."

She hoped that she sounded encouraging for her.

"I hope so, but I still hear things, you know. That comment made me think."

"You think that's bad, there's never been a Virginia Rose that lived past thirty-seven years old. Now that's scary."

"I know; however, John and Ralph say that you will be the one who changes that. You might live to be one hundred."

"Oh, gosh! Can you imagine how wrinkled I would be? Of course, the tabloids would have me on the cover as SCIENTISTS DISCOVER LIVING WRINKLE THAT CAN TALK IN DOVER, DELAWARE. No thanks. I want to live past thirty-seven, but not that long."

"You can be so silly sometimes. Keep it up, I like it when you're this way."

John came in with Jacob and Dozen in his arms. He put them on the bed, and they bounced around and then crawled to Virginia, smothering her face with wet kisses.

"Hi, Guys. What are you up to?"

"We gonna watch you after you come home tomorrow," said Dozen, staring at her intently. "Right now, we practice."

"Watch me do what, munchkin?"

"Ride in a chair," Jacob said. He put his hands out like he held a steering wheel and turned it around. "Don't crash, Mommy."

Virginia moved her gaze to John. "What are you up to?"

"Daddy got you a wheelchair that you can drive with your head, Mommy," Dozen chipped in, bouncing on the bed once more. "You can race, us now."

"Okay! Whoop! Prepare to lose your allowance."

Jacob and Dozen looked at each other and then to Virginia.

Jacob shook his head. "No money, Mommy, just for fun."

John laughed at them. "Well, I guess if I want to keep a secret, then I can't tell them. What I have for you is a wheelchair designed for quadriplegic people. It's motorized and controlled with your head, nose, and mouth. It will give you greater mobility."

Immediately, Virginia worried about the expense.

John shrugged. "Well, let me put it this way, darling. Without my knowledge, the lawyers and secretaries of my firm and the parent firm in Wilmington, the DA, and his office, and quite a few of the Judges, pooled the money and bought it for you. It was expensive and I protested, but they refused to give in or give up. They want to see you back in the courtroom sometimes, to keep them in line when they make a bad decision."

Virginia's eyes got wet. "Oh, John! That's so nice of them. We'll have to thank them, very much."

"I have and we'll do it again, in person someday."

Julie entered with Ralph Watson and complained. "What is this?" she demanded. "I leave my wife alone for five minutes and look at the stray dogs that wander into the bedroom."

"Why don't you bring in some chairs, a stereo, some beer, and we'll have a party?" Virginia asked John.

"Thought you'd never ask," said Julie.

She clapped her hands once. "Come on inside, folks." She left and returned with a small table, placed it beside the bed, and Jamie followed, carrying a cake, and putting it on the table. She was followed by Shirley, John's secretary, with two pitchers of lemonade. Behind her came Jeff with a bag of cups, plates, and forks.

Virginia's eyes shone as she looked at each one. "Okay, what is it? It's too early for my birthday and our anniversary. What is it? What are you up to?"

"It's a celebration of life," Shirley said.

"It's a celebration of love," Jamie added.

"It's a celebration for the life and love of a beautiful Virginia Rose," concluded Julie.

"Happy Life and Love Day."

"Okay! Thank you all. I like icing. Make my piece one loaded with icing."

*

Paula felt happy but surprised at Virginia's insistence to include her during the next hospital visit. She stayed out of the way and watched with quiet reserve. Dr. Carlton called to say he would be arriving late, so Dr. Charlene Dixon, the gynecologist, took his place.

"Can I get pregnant while I'm like this and if I can, could I deliver them with no problem?" Virginia asked.

Dr. Dixon moved her glasses up and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Have you delivered children before?"

"Two of them here in this hospital."

"Are you still having periods?"

"Yes, and they're all regular too."

"The only negative is the scar tissue on the uterus. It was deep, but the latest CAT Scan shows the scar tissue considerably healed. That would be the only drawback besides the problem of you helping with the contractions by pushing with your abdominal muscles. If you're interested, I can do some tests and give you a better answer. I don't know how the uterus would

respond without the normal nervous system working. That might be a problem, but it could be done through insemination.”

“There’s some feeling. I can feel hot and cold water when I’m in the tub. Maybe that’s a good sign, I don’t know. You have some time before Dr. Carlton arrives, so check me out,” Virginia told her.

She dismissed the doctor and glanced at Paula, who seemed distracted. “Are you okay?”

Paula nodded.

“Come over here a moment,” Virginia told her.

Paula moved to the bed and leaned her head down close to Virginia’s.

“I don’t know why I asked you to be here, Paula, but I had this feeling you needed to be here. Just stay alert. If you see or hear anything that isn’t right, speak up,” she whispered.

Paula felt strange, but she returned to her spot in the room and watched again. Soon Charlene finished the pelvic exam and Virginia lay once more on the bed normally. She felt a chill and turned her head to the left. The door moved slightly and the woman in the brown skirt and white blouse entered the room, walked to the bed, and touched Virginia and Julie on their heads. The next stop was Paula, and she knelt in front of the girl.

“Speak with your mind, for they cannot see or hear me. Do not fear. No harm will come to you, my lovely child.”

Paula nodded and the woman stood behind her and rested her hands on her shoulders. They instantly warmed her, and all her fears vanished.

“That’s much better, Paula.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Virginia Rose One, the first one on American soil. There were others in England and Ireland before me. Would you like to see them?”

“Are they all as pretty and loving as you?”

Virginia Rose One gave a precocious laugh. “You are a sweet child. Some of them are even prettier. Some make me look pale and lifeless in comparison.”

Paula sighed and smiled at Virginia and Julie, who stared at her strangely.

“They know something spiritual is here,” Virginia Rose One said. “Virginia is learning to follow the little voice we talk to inside her. That is a good thing.”

Paula smiled wistfully. “I’d love to meet all the roses. I’d love to hug and kiss all of them. You make me feel so loved when you’re around. I feel that nothing in the world can hurt me now or ever if you stayed with your hands on my shoulders, Virginia Rose One.”

“I know, Paula. Someday, nothing will. You will lose the hurt that binds you and restricts your sought-after life. You will be healed. The love of the Virginia Roses will be infused into every cell of your body and mind. You will witness and testify to the strength and power of their love combined. Have patience, my lovely.”

She placed a hand across Paula’s mouth and then removed it. “Silence and listen now. Speak only when I prompt you.”

Dr. Dixon discarded the exam gloves and washed her hands. “If you decided to get pregnant, I would advise against it. I’m concerned about the uterus rupturing when the walls start expanding. Furthermore, the cervix is tight now, but I don’t know how it would react when the baby starts putting pressure on it. In addition, it’s doubtful that you could become pregnant

without the normal movement of the womb. So, it would most likely have to be done through artificial insemination.”

Paula cleared her throat. “Dr. Dixon, is the cervix a voluntarily controlled muscle? Can you cause it to contract or open from sheer will or thoughts from the mind?”

Everyone turned heads and stared at the girl.

“No, it isn’t,” Charlene replied. “Who are you?”

“I’m Paula Anderson. If the cervix is not a voluntary muscle, then there’s no reason for it to relax and dilate until the baby is at full term. That’s controlled by the hormone cycle and the biological clock of the body, not the conscious mind or the fear of a doctor or midwife.”

Dr. Dixon blinked and scrunched her face. “That’s a good point. Do you also want to play doctor and tell me about the womb?”

“I certainly do. The scar tissue will hold, and the womb will not rupture as you are concerned it will. The body will do whatever is necessary, even if it requires the fetus to be born with less weight and size to protect the life it carries and itself.”

Dr. Dixon stared dumbfounded at Paula, then her face grew annoyed.

“What about the conception, then?”

“The sperm and ovum will take care of that as they were created to do. The movement you speak of would be a help, but it’s not necessary. The main problem will be Virginia to overcome John’s objections and convince him to do it the natural way. Surrender of the demivierge will prove to be the most difficult task and the only drawback to a pregnancy.”

Dr. Dixon lightly slapped her own face. “Who are you to sit there and argue with me? Have you graduated from Medical School?”

“Have you?” Paula fired back with a stern voice. “If you wish, I can take you to the textbooks you used and show you the page and paragraph of what I say. Your professors may have ignored them, but I will not. Also, if you wish, I can take you to textbooks removed from the curriculum through the stupidity of asinine deans and surgeon generals. They would explain the functions of the pregnant, paralyzed body and even give you a case history to study.”

“State your fears, Physician, or silence yourself and stop worrying the Virginia Rose beside you.”

Dr. Dixon turned her head away to break eye contact with Paula.

“I’m afraid for you to become pregnant because there have been no cases like this for me or anyone whom I know of to study and make a capable judgment. It might work, and it might not. If you were under my care, I would insist on very close observation during the last three months in case it might have to be delivered by C-Section.”

“Thank you, Dr. Dixon,” Virginia said. “You needn’t fear telling me the truth.”

Paula spoke once more. “Go to Wilmington, to the New Castle County Public Library. There you will find some medical books dating from 1880 and forward, so you can learn from the past, Doctor Dixon.”

“Thanks, I’ll remember that. Is there anything else, Virginia?”

“No, Doctor. Thank you. I’ll let you know what happens.”

She turned to Paula as Dr. Dixon left the room. “Thank you, Paula.”

Dr. Carlton entered the room with his assistants, and Paula watched silently again until he prepared to terminate his treatment. He received many more responses than the previous time.

Paula walked to the bed. “Dr. Carlton, which one of these wires do you call the anode?” she asked.

He wrinkled his forehead. “All of the blue ones are the anode. Why?”

She took one from Virginia's right leg and moved it to the base of her neck. "Which of these is the cathode?"

"What are you doing?"

Paula repeated her question.

"Either one. I asked what you're doing."

"I heard you, physician. I simply chose not to answer before you did. I'm going to give her a jump start."

"What?"

"Do pay attention! I don't have a lifetime to stand here and instruct you in your vocabulary. I'm going to give her a head start, because the Lines of Demarcation are close to collapse. Turn the red knob to four point fifteen millivolts and the green knob to one hundred nanosecond pulses."

"I'm tired of you women. . ."

Paula deftly shoved him aside. "You will silence yourself and observe only, or I will grow tired of you. That is something you cannot well afford, physician. All masters learn from someone. I did. You will."

She instructed Julie to do it.

Julie did and watched as if under a spell.

Paula traced her left index finger down Virginia's spine, counting and stopped. Finally, she poised the probe against her finger and spoke to Virginia.

"Bear it, Virginia. You are going to be fine." She inserted and pressed the switch.

Virginia gasped, and both arms shot straight out from the bed. "Oh! Whoa! That hurts. Stop it."

Both arms twitched and her hands jerked around so fast they could not be followed by the eyes.

"Oh, that hurts," Virginia complained again. "What are you doing? Stop the pain, please?"

"Bear it, Virginia. You are going to be fine," Paula repeated.

A few seconds later, Paula stopped, and Virginia relaxed. Her arms still twitched though she denied feeling them.

Paula calmly returned to her chair and sat down.

"You did very well," commented Virginia Rose One. "You are very receptive and that is wonderful. Virginia will be fine, really."

"I trust you."

"I must go now, My Child," she said. She kissed Paula's face. "But be assured we will meet again. Know that you are loved and embrace that knowledge until we can deal with all the wrongs involved here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

John sat in Ralph's cluttered basement, and together they reviewed their notes. Finally, they neared their deadline to write the rough draft of the book, *The McNaultys vs. The Virginia Roses*. Since the onset, they had both read the diaries and researched as many of the courthouse records, they could find. They searched through every cemetery in the state, found every grave for the McNaulty's and the Virginia Rose's, their husbands, and wives. They searched every cemetery registry they could find and wrote letters to courthouses and churches in England and Ireland, asking for the information on the families there. They sorted and filed and awaited the answers.

Ralph gestured to the stack of documents. "This is quite a mountain of papers. Also, you still have to come up with the information on that, uh, Morgan fellow whose wife never died."

John groaned and feigned misery. "Oh, that. Why didn't you remind me of that sooner?"

"Can I remind you of something else?"

"Why not? Load me up but withhold the final straw."

Ralph nodded. "You wanted to go through the courthouse basement and review the old trial transcripts. You wanted to see if you could find the specific charges against Nathan Merriweather. You wrote down the dream, so you should find that information if you can. It might reveal a major key to the evidence we have already."

John stretched and twisted until his back bones cracked. "Thanks. I'll accept this once. However, if you wait until we're on the final draft and you remember something I was to do before I was born, you're dead meat. I'll just kill you and plea bargain on grounds of insanity; I'd have to be crazy for working with you."

Ralph laughed. "Fair enough, John Boy. He placed another paper on the Virginia Rose pile."

"When are you going to marry, Ralph?"

"When I find a woman as good as your Virginia Rose."

"Then you plan on living alone till you die, right?"

"Something like that. I sometimes think of marriage, children, schools, and vacations. Then I think of the freedom I have now and maybe I'm not ready yet. Why did you ask that?"

"No reason. I was just thinking of Jolene and then I thought that you would have been a great husband for her."

Ralph frowned. "Jolene? Oh, yes, I remember. You're right about that. I'd have been a better husband than George McNaulty."

"Well, it looks like the bloodlines for the McNaulty's are at an end. His death and the death of Judge Walter Q. McNaulty finished them."

"Not to mention the Stanley McNaulty's suicide." Ralph frowned again. "Something's wrong with that picture, though. Too convenient, wouldn't you think? What if there's another McNaulty alive?"

"What are you talking about, Ralph?"

"I'm thinking, with all the screwing around they did, in the family and out, maybe they left an illegitimate son or daughter that could regenerate the lines."

"Paula," John said sadly. "No, she's a McNaulty, but."

"Stop that! Don't think that way."

"Sorry," John apologized. "Paula should be safe now, with George dead. You might be right about the others though. But unfortunately, that could be impossible to trace."

"It might be, but it could be significant. I felt that you were a little crazy when you first talked about the dreams. Now I'm not so sure. The more we work, the more I feel that all this information is trying to tell us something significant. If that theory's true, then I shall find the bastard out there, somewhere in the world."

"Then what?" asked John.

"Kill him! I'll kill him, just to do it."

"You're not going to turn radical on me, are you?"

Ralph laughed. "Nah, I'm just voicing my opinion. There's more than one way to kill someone."

John sorted some more papers. "I just wish I could learn how the first Virginia Rose died. Maybe that one piece would put the rest together."

"When the time is right, you will. I'll find the last McNaulty, you'll find the Morgan fellow, and you'll also find how and why she died. Trust me."

*

Two weeks after the hospital visit, Virginia felt much better. She thought that if the things that Dr. Carlton did nothing but leave her exhilarated, it was time well spent. However, there was a significant difference after the therapy session. She kept the information to herself and used her willpower when she was alone.

Julie arrived one day, and Virginia asked her to sit on the edge of the bed and be quiet. Julie did and looked at her intense face. She finally glanced and Virginia's right arm slowly twitched and rose from the bed. It dropped twice and then it moved, slowly until the hand rested on Julie's cheek.

She sighed from the effort required. "There, Julie. How's that? Does that feel good?"

"It does, sweet thing. That's the most wonderful touch I've ever received. This is totally great! How long have you been trying that?"

"For ten days, more or less." The arm slid down, and Julie caught it and kissed her fingers.

Virginia strained again and the fingers closed softly around Julie's hand. "Within a year, I want another baby. Hard work and self-discipline will pay off."

"Have you talked with John yet?"

"No, only the one time I hinted at it, and he said okay, but I haven't brought it up again."

Julie watched the determination on her face and didn't tell her about the dream that said it would not happen the way she wanted.

Two weeks later, Virginia could move her right arm and hand with much more control. She could use it to write short sentences and even open a door knob, but it remained weak. Nevertheless, she still felt elated and applied more concentration and self-discipline.

Then she decided to tackle the problem of John, sex, and babies. John lay with her in bed, and she could at least grip his hand when they were together.

"John, do you remember that we tried to make another baby right before the accident?"

"Yes, I remember that."

"Well, I think that we should try again."

John remained silent a moment. "Do you mean now?"

"Yes. I wasn't thinking of next year."

“How could that work?”

Virginia explained how it could work. “The only thing is that it might have to be delivered with a C-Section.”

“What about the sex part? How can you get around or over that?”

“What’s wrong, honey? Don’t you want to make love with me?”

“John?” she asked after a long silence. “Will you talk to me, please? I can’t do this by myself, you know? What’s wrong?”

The pause was long and painful. Then, “I’m not sure I can.”

“You love me less because I can’t move my legs or arms?” She agonized over the answer.

“No! This is hard to put into words. I do love you, but, well, I don’t feel good about the sex part of it. We have always shared everything and still can, but we can’t share that. So, it would be me alone, and I’m sorry, but I can’t feel good about it. I’ve thought about it since you first mentioned having a baby. I don’t know how to handle the feeling that it will be abusing you. Can you understand that? I would feel like I was abusing you and dread feeling that way about you.”

Virginia was the one to lie silent at that time. She had not expected that response, but she remembered his detesting the sex offender cases. A sense of helplessness started gnawing at her strength. She fought the feeling down with a resolution to win eventually.

“Okay, my love. We’ll not talk about this anymore tonight, but we will soon. There are other things to think about than that. Good night, darling.”

John dreamed.

Matthew Merriweather and six other men waited outside the carriage house of a large estate in the darkness. The estate itself was ten miles north of Dover. The house sat a good quarter mile from where the men waited. They spoke not a word until the horse and carriage entered the lane and made its way toward them.

“He’s here,” Matthew whispered, and the other men shifted their positions.

The driver stopped, stepped down from the front seat, and removed a small bag from the luggage holder in the back. When he moved, John saw the words, The Honorable Stanley Q. McNaulty, written across the back of the carriage. The judge proceeded to the front, and Matthew and the men confronted him before he could reach the horse.

“What’s the meaning of this?” McNaulty asked.

“You know the answer already! Soon the entire colony will know also. You’re finished, Judge,” Matthew said. “And don’t try to worm yourself out of this one. You’re done!”

“You had all better go! All of you! Go and go now.”

“When we’ve finished,” said Matthew.

He quickly drew back his right fist and struck McNaulty in the mouth and then kicked him in the stomach. The other men grabbed him and shoved him roughly to the ground.

“We find you guilty of the murder of Virginia Rose Merriweather!” said Matthew. “The sentence for taking her life is your death.”

Four of the men swung around long rifles and aimed them at the judge.

“You’re all crazy!” the judge sputtered. “You’ll all hang for this! The woman died of a disease. Leave me alone!”

“For the murder of Virginia Rose, you will die,” finished Matthew.

The four guns fired at once and Judge Stanley McNaulty died. The horse bolted and ran toward the back of the barn with the carriage. Matthew and the six men departed the estate quickly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“This is getting strange, and exciting, John. “Are you sure that’s the way it went?”

“Yes. I remember the confusion on Stanley’s face at first. He couldn’t quite relate to what was being said. Then his feelings changed to guilt and an intense fear of Matthew. Like he thought, ‘How the hell did he find out?’ He denied it, of course, but the guilt was not hidden from me.”

“He said she died of a disease?”

John shrugged and sat again. “That’s what he said. I could think of many diseases that he could be talking about. But unfortunately, there were few cures for the plagues and viruses during that time.”

“Now the great stopper. Why?”

“Why don’t you ask her?” John chuckled.

“So where do we go now?”

“Well, I found a few Morgans in the phone book and I’ve started to trace him. I think we need to review all we have while we tackle the final pieces of the puzzle.”

*

Julie got all the children to bed at their request and returned to help Virginia Rose get back into her bed.

“You’re really coming along with this cartooning, sweet thing. Ralph said the first ones in his column were a great hit. I think you’ve struck a nerve in the community.”

“Yes,” replied Virginia as Julie straightened her legs. “I can make progress with columns and cartoons, but not my husband. He’s hard to reach. Maybe he’s too strong for me.”

“I don’t think so. I think you haven’t hit the correct nerve. What’s the latest thing you did?”

“I told him that if he wouldn’t help me to become pregnant, then I would let Charlene Dixon do it with artificial insemination. To that he made no reply. This is the killer problem because I’m serious and I don’t think he believes me.”

Julie’s smile faded and she moved the hair from the sides of Virginia’s face. “You can’t mean that,” she said.

“Yes! I do mean it!”

“Don’t you think that’s being a little unreasonable?” Julie asked.

“No. I think that my husband’s being most unreasonable. I can’t reach him. He knows what I want; he just refuses to help me. And I can’t lay here forever like I am now.”

Julie gave no reply, but she did not like that response. “Well, I’m going home. I’ll see you tomorrow. Try just once more, okay?”

“I’ll try a few more times, Julie. I’ll keep trying until the day I go for the appointment. Then I won’t try or care anymore.”

Julie walked down the dark stairway and stood in front of the basement door and rehearsed her options and positives on sex with Virginia.

“Damn, John, what is your problem?” She finally opened the door.

“Okay. John, don’t you understand what you’re doing is wrong? Don’t you know that Virginia can do this without you? How can you let that happen? Do you know what will happen?”

“Once they put this little cup over the cervix and fill it with semen, guess what, John? She’ll get pregnant from some other man, and it will happen in seconds, not many trials. I’m so upset I could slap the shit out of you. How can you let that happen?”

She threw up her hands. “I quit! Julie, just shut up and go the hell home! Forget all this rose stuff. I can’t help her with it. You can’t say that to John. It’s none of your business.”

She closed the door and turned to leave. “Like hell, it isn’t. However, I can’t tell him tonight. I’m so pissed off that I don’t dare to do that right now. So, I’ll suffer for a time and hope Virginia can penetrate his thick stupidity.”

She sighed and walked through the dining room toward the kitchen.

“Julie, stop.”

Julie squealed and whirled. She saw John’s figure standing in the doorway of the dark living room. She felt sure that even with the darkness, he could see the red of her stinging cheeks, probably glowing like neon signs.

“You scared me, John,” she forced herself to say with a dry mouth. “How?”

“Do we need to talk, my friend? I think we do. Come back and join me in the living room for a moment.”

Julie crossed the floor, taking a few deep breaths and listening to her heart pounding in her ears. “Sorry, John. I didn’t mean for you to hear that. I was just letting off steam.”

John let it pass, sat on the sofa, and looked up at her. “I asked you once who sent you, can you tell me now? How many times have you done this rehabilitation thing?”

She sighed as if her execution was near, and no hope remained. Her hands trembled as she dropped to her knees and shook her head. “I’ve never done anything like this before.” She tried and failed to stop the tears. “Never. My specialty is getting teenagers off drugs and helping them to clean up their lives. I hurt so much, and I can’t stop it. It won’t go away. I don’t want to know the things I know, and I don’t want to get caught up in the emotions of something I can’t see and fight, but I can’t stop it.”

John moved forward and held out his hands and Julie moved to him.

“Sarah Johns sent me,” she sniffled as he hugged her. “She couldn’t handle the pain. Those few minutes, while holding Virginia in her arms, bleeding and screaming, and Steve dying in her arms, they broke her. I don’t know why she called me, but she did, and sometimes I wish she hadn’t. I wish I hadn’t answered the damned phone.”

“She asked for me to help her. She’s in a private hospital here in Delaware. She screamed and cried, and I couldn’t calm her. However, she wouldn’t talk to me after the first time. Whenever I was in the room with her, she stared straight ahead or away from me for two months and talked to someone only she could see. She spoke to Virginia, but the words were too old and archaic to be your wife. No one could touch her or get a response. So, she either lay silent or talked to the invisible one.”

“Then one day, she changed, just for a moment. She grabbed my blouse and pulled me close to her. ‘Go to Virginia Bennington,’ she said. She told me that once I stepped inside your house that all things necessary would be given to me. She told me that I must go to save the children and above all to save Virginia Rose. Then she lay back down, and since then has not spoken to anyone, visible or invisible.”

John sat and held her while he digested her statement.

“I’m sorry, John. Everything I told the teachers that day is the truth except that I’ve never involved myself with a paralyzed woman. I have no idea what I’m doing. I’m scared all the time

that I'll make a mistake and truly hurt her. The pressure is so great, but I can't stop. I'm sorry for lying about that."

He responded with tenderness. "Julie, that's quite okay. You've performed a miracle in this house, whether you've done it before or not. For that I will be eternally grateful and thankful. There'll be no anger or hatred from me over this. I love what you've done for her and me."

"Also, I thought that I was the only one who talked to the first Virginia Rose."

"Not true. She's been with Paula and me also. Paula had Charlene Dixon angry with all the true statements she made about pregnancy. Paula pinned her down and she finally surrendered and told Virginia the truth."

"What are you going to do this weekend?" John asked.

"I planned to spend it at home with Jeff. I need to spend some quiet time with him. Why?"

"It's going to be a three-day break, so I want to talk with Ralph tomorrow. I want you to take all the research material we've gathered and read it all. It will take a few hours, but I think you're the White Rose of Salvation we read about in one of the diaries. We read about Jolene's death, Steve killing his father, and even Virginia being hurt. It took us a long time to put it together. Maybe, since you're a woman, you can learn something that we can't about this, this, whatever it is."

She sat back on her heels. "Thanks for holding me. That was very kind. I felt like I was going to explode."

He chuckled. "I'm glad you didn't. I hear women make a terrible mess when they explode."

She remembered her comment to Paula and laughed.

"Well, if Ralph agrees, I'll read the material and see if it makes sense. I just hope that when it's over that Sarah Johns is included in the healing."

He walked her to the kitchen door and suddenly kissed her.

"You're an angel, Julie. Thank you. Don't leave us, even when it's over."

He opened the door for her. "Now go on home and play with Jeff. I'll go and see if Virginia might be horny or maybe get that way."

He locked the door, went upstairs, and lay on the bed beside Virginia.

He kissed her until she opened her eyes.

"Wow!" she said when he stopped. "Hello to you too. Where have you been?"

"I went for a detour through Seaford. Now, I'm back. I'm too full of loneliness, and I decided you're right. Another baby would be nice, and I can't see you getting one from someone else. So, if you're still interested, we'll see how you can respond. Are you up to it?"

"Are you kidding? You can tell me things like this without talking."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Virginia progressed in her cartoon strip, Jolene's Life, and the readers in Delaware liked the message it delivered. The strips were seldom funny, but the impact kept the readers' attention and their response to the paper was overwhelming. Ralph went out of his way to help whenever possible. As a result, the paper soon offered her a slot as a full-time cartoonist. Ralph was ecstatic when she accepted.

Virginia made several trips to the courtroom to view the trials. The judges and lawyers always found time to greet her and talk with her. They accepted her criticism and her flattery when she wrote the columns for the paper. She liked the change in herself, mentally, emotionally, and physically.

She felt herself making progress toward self-discipline.

Julie still visited regularly, and she helped John and Ralph when she could. The remainder of her time she spent with Virginia and Paula.

"The things the guys have discovered are amazing, Virginia," Julie assured her.

"Must we talk about that?" Virginia complained. "John doesn't talk much about it, and I like that. I'm willing just to let what is in store happen. Additionally, every time you bring the subject up, John starts dreaming again. That bothers me."

"How's the left arm?" Julie asked, changing the subject. Then, she began the muscle toning exercises.

"It's constantly getting better. "I look forward to the day that I'm up and around. I feel it coming closer."

"Will Paula be able to go back to school next year?" Virginia asked later.

"Yes. Whatever problems remain, we can work out in the evenings. Are you missing her already?"

"Yes. She's been a big help to me when you're not around. First, I try to help her, and then I find that I've aided myself too."

"That's good."

Virginia spoke again after a silent spell, "Do you think I could assist you sometimes?"

What would you do for me?"

"Well, you've told me about the teenagers handicapping their minds, like I did. So, I thought, if you don't mind and if it helped them or you, maybe I could be with you at the office on occasion. I could give them a good testimony about getting straight and doing it without drugs, just self-discipline and loving yourself."

Julie smiled. "You know, you surprise me sometimes. That's a good offer and I'll take you up on that. I'll take you some day when I have my worst cases. They have a tough time learning to love themselves and their bodies are healthy. Thank you.

"And I might as well bring this up right now, also. I've thought of what will happen when Paula leaves you next September and goes back to school full-time. It's my idea to have some high school graduates that are not going to college, but who want some experience in working with disabled people visit you. It will do them good to work with someone who's been through the worst and are now in the recovery stage."

"I think I could deal with that. I love seeing different people. Speaking of different people, where is Sarah Johns? I wonder why she hasn't visited me. I've left messages at work and at home and she never returned my calls."

Julie did not respond immediately. "I don't know. Maybe she transferred or something."

"Bull, Julie. You don't lie very well. Your face and silence scream, liar! Where is she?"

"She's recovering from a breakdown. She's had problems with drug addictions before. This time the drugs didn't work."

"Would my visiting her help?"

"I don't know."

"You don't want to talk about it, do you?"

"Not, no it's okay."

"Did she snap completely?"

"Okay. Honesty for you, love. For a while I thought she wouldn't, but she did. She talked to Virginia Rose One for a long time. Now she says nothing."

"I want to see her if I can."

"I'll have to see what I can do. But I'll make no promises. She's been taken away from me. She's far beyond my help or the scope of my abilities."

"Because of me?"

"No, not because of you. She had problems before that. Steve killing his father and then dying in her arms had the biggest impact. She talked to Virginia Rose One a lot about that. The investigation and suspension from the force afterwards didn't help, even though she was cleared and reinstated. She only lasted a week until she was back on Valium, illegally, and then she lost it. I don't know if she'll ever recover."

Virginia sighed. "When will all the pain of that day end?"

"She's the one who sent me to you. The last words she spoke were, 'Go to Virginia. Save her children, but above all, save her. She is important to the future of the roses. Save her.' Then she lapsed into complete silence. She had such a pleading face that I could not keep from coming here, and I'm glad I did. So, my love, I'll make the request, and we'll deal with the answer."

*

"How's everything going?" Virginia asked John when he joined her in bed. "How's your career? Are you still a junior partner?"

"Well, Barris confirmed today that I'm going to be accepted into the firm as a Senior Partner. It won't be effective until September, but I got it, sweetheart. So, in September, I'll be officially dry behind my ears."

She laughed and remembered her first meeting with him. "That's great news. You're remarkable news. You're a grand lover, however, you're going to have to work harder."

"To make a baby, right?"

"No, to make me rip the sheets up. It's weird, having all that pleasure and not being able to move like I did before. It's like maybe putting a pan of water on the stove, welding the lid shut, and turning the heat to high. The pressure builds until something explodes. However, with me, I can't explode, so I get an emotional backlash that is out of this world."

"Shut up."

"Shut me up. Come on, I dare you to shut me up!" She pulled his face down to hers.

John reached across her and turned off the lights.

Later, while kissing her, he stopped.

"What are you doing, John? Don't stop! What's wrong with you? Oh, gosh, I might explode for real this time. Why did you do that?"

He turned the light on to dim. "Sorry, but your leg moved."

She raised her hands to cover her face and calmed down. "Okay, darling. What happened?"

He told her again.

"Well, then let it move. Unless it's running away, don't stop what you're doing, darling.

Help me sit up here."

He helped her and she looked at her right leg, bent at the knee and spread farther out than at the beginning.

"Wow! Maybe that is a good sign, but I hope it doesn't interrupt us too often."

"Okay. I got the message. I'm sorry, but I thought that was far greater an event."

"Right on, honey. I guess we'll call it quits for tonight. Turn off the lights and hold my hand."

For the first time in a long while, John dreamed.

Virginia Rose Merriweather stood in the dim light near a cabin west of Dover. She watched Judge Stanley McNaulty, and three other men carry a woman from the cabin and put her inside the luggage compartment of his carriage.

"She was a fine one, Judge," one man said. "You can always find good ones."

The Judge laughed and the man who spoke grinned.

Judge McNaulty turned and climbed into the seat and took up the reins. He clicked his tongue and snapped the leather reins, and the horse moved away from the cabin at a steady gait. He looked to the right and saw Virginia Rose One standing among the trees watching him.

"Whoa!" he shouted and pulled back on the reins. The horse stopped in its tracks, and the Judge climbed down from the seat.

Virginia Rose One turned and ran into the forest without looking back. She could run fast, but the petticoats and long skirt slowed her. The Judge caught up with her before she could make it to the closest house. He tackled her and she fell hard, and the air was forced from her lungs. He hit her on the back of her head, and she saw a brilliant flash of light and lost consciousness.

When she woke, she felt warm and soon realized that the heat came from a stove, and she felt it acutely for she was naked and tied to a bed. Immediately she struggled against the ropes.

"No!" she yelled, and the Judge turned his attention to her, as did the other three men in the room.

He gave his most congenial smile. "Hello, Virginia. I thought for a while that I had hit you too hard. Men don't appreciate women who just lie still you know."

"No!" she repeated.

"Yes," he said. He took a piece of cloth from the table, held her head while he forced it into her mouth, and stepped back from the bed. "If you're not going to talk like you should, then shut up."

She breathed hard through her nose and glared at him.

"You'll like this, Virginia Rose. This gentleman here is one of the best men around. Unfortunately, he has a little problem with a disease, but he still does a good job."

"Umph" said Virginia and shook her head.

"Yes," said the Judge. "She's all yours, George."

The man called George stood by the bed and played with her breasts and legs while she tried to free herself. She breathed heavily through her nose and sometimes made a wheezing noise.

George took off his shirt and then his pants.

Virginia stopped a moment when he moved back beside her, and she could not stop her eyes from looking. She viewed the running sores all over his penis and his upper legs.

She shook her head from side to side and cried. The tears flew with the twists. George climbed onto the bed, and Virginia pulled one last time against the ropes. She jerked so hard that she dislocated her right shoulder, and she felt a fiery pain in her left ankle and heard a loud snap. The rag finally came free from her mouth.

“No,” she screamed. “Please don’t!”

George did not stop. Regardless of what little struggle she had left, he penetrated her.

She shrieked and stared angrily at the Judge, who stood stoically. “You will die for this! Oh, God! Nathan! Oh, Nathan! Oh, Dear Nathan!”

The Judge stepped forward and hit her in her face. Her head snapped hard to the left, and she lost consciousness again.

Later she woke beside the side of a road that she did not recognize. Beside her and laying across her legs was the widow, Anna Mae Wilson.

When Virginia tried to move her, she discovered that she was dead. She freed herself and pulled the blanket from under the lifeless woman and wrapped it around herself. Finally, she felt at least covered from the nightmare she had lived earlier. She huddled on the side of the road and stared blankly as she prayed.

Later, she heard a buckboard and saw a man coming in the distance.

The buckboard was drawn by two horses. She sat still and did not move, even after he called her and stood before her. Finally, he bent down, and after checking the dead woman, he gripped Virginia’s shoulders and raised her to her feet.

“I’m Doctor Morgan. How did this happen? Who did this?”

Virginia shook her head and remained silent, so the doctor moved the blanket from her right shoulder and inspected it. It was red and swollen. He noticed that she stood funny and bent to check the left ankle. It was red and swollen also. He could see the rope burns left from the struggle, and he did not ask any more questions.

“I’m not really a people doctor, but I will take you to my house, and I’ll set your shoulder, and I’ll do what I can for your ankle.”

Virginia stared blankly and hung her head. He picked her up and lay her down in the back of the buckboard and took another blanket to move the other woman inside. Virginia sat by the left side and watched him struggle.

She finally moved and helped him get the dead woman on and covered.

“Thanks,” he said, breathing hard.

She simply sat and stared at the ground.

The carriage stopped outside a farm, and Virginia recognized that she was near Smyrna. The man was Doctor Morgan, a veterinarian who sometimes treated people when he could. She watched him closely, and she assisted as much as she could in getting herself down. Finally, he led her inside and sat her on a low canvas cot in what she thought to be his office.

“Lucienne! Come quickly and bring one of your robes!” he shouted.

A woman answered, and he took some things from a drawer in a table.

He rolled it up inside some clear white paper and handed it to her.

“Here, smoke this,” he instructed.

Virginia shook her head.

“Look, Miss,” Dr. Morgan said. “When I set that shoulder, it’s going to hurt. This opium will dull the pain, and it will ease some of the other pain you feel also.”

He handed it to her again, and she placed it in her lips. He struck a match and held it under the tip. She inhaled and coughed a few times. She looked around the room as the effects of the opium set into her body and mind. It made her feel good as he said and then some. She stopped her eyes when they reached a point to her left. In the corner, in a wooden crate, lay a sheep. Its breathing was labored and there were red bubbles making appearances around its nostrils.

Lucienne rushed inside the room and started fussing over Virginia.

She looked at the swollen shoulder and then at the rope burns on the wrists and ankles. Finally, she emitted a series of violent words and gestures in French, and her face grew furious.

“I know, Lucienne,” Dr. Morgan said. “Help me set her shoulder and then fix her some soup.”

Lucienne stood behind Virginia and held her with solid arms while the doctor jerked her arm and shoved it back into the socket.

Virginia squealed, and her head swung lazily around. She was glad that she had accepted the opium, and the pain started to dim very soon.

Lucienne got the cotton gown on her and wrapped the blanket around her again.

Virginia sat in silence as he checked the sheep and straightened and labeled some empty bottles with lids.

Lucienne called him from somewhere outside, and Dr. Morgan stood. “I’ll be right back, Miss,” he told the woman and went out the door with his hat.

*

John sat up on the bed, his arms flailing. He grabbed his right shoulder, swung his legs over the edge of the bed, and ended on the floor, leaning against the door crying.

“John?” called Virginia. “John, what’s wrong?”

He cried profusely, taking deep breaths, trying to rid himself of the emotional pain he felt. Virginia called him again.

“I’m okay,” he said, feeling the emotions drain away. “That was a hideous dream. What a terrible event for a woman to experience.”

“Will this thing with your dreams ever stop?” Virginia worried. “Come on back to bed.”

He stood and rubbed his shoulder as he crossed the floor.

“Want to tell me about it?” she asked, holding a hand.

“Not this one. Not now. It was a dream to show me the connection between the Virginia Roses and McNaulty’s. It wasn’t a nice one. What a hideous thing to do to a woman.

“I’m sorry, love. I’m not doing this on purpose. Be patient because I think they’re nearing the end,” he told her.

“I will. If I didn’t love you, I’d have gone long ago. You’re giving me petals of steel, darling. They’re a soft metal but strong enough to keep the love burning in the wind.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

June arrived and the earth filled with life. The windows remained open nearly all the time in Virginia's bedroom when she lay there. She listened to the children outside, playing in their wading pool, feeling tired and lazy, but happy. Her monthly friend had not arrived on time, and she was prepared to announce her pregnancy to the world. Instead, she dozed all morning fitfully, burned out from a frenzy of cartoons for the paper. She also considered whether to accept or reject an offer from a national syndication. That would put her cartoon, Jolene's Corner, in over 4000 newspapers. She still wondered if she could keep up with the demand of production and the momentum that might be necessary when she did.

The same thing happened to Ralph when he went national. She wanted it desperately. However, she feared the loss of appeal to the local audience if she should let her quality and relevance slip under pressure. She did not feel that secure with the readers. She ended the most recent round of debates with a severe concentration on trying to make her toes move. They did not.

*

Julie lay her office phone down and pulled at the collar of her blouse that clung to her skin. She sighed, sat back in her chair, and rubbed her damp forehead. Two clients in a row had canceled within five minutes of each other.

"That's what I should have done, canceled the whole damned morning and slept," she declared to a fly that buzzed by her face. She swiped at it and sat upright to check her calendar. The next appointment was at 1:00 p.m.

"That's over two hours away,"

She felt the beginning urge for sex, and that added to the frustration. She disliked feeling sexual in the heavy humidity. In addition, she could find no reason for it. She thought of John Bennington and his problems with Virginia Rose during the slack time. However, she knew that it was not because of him.

She rolled up a newspaper section and smashed the fly that had bugged her all morning. She sighed again, took a tissue from her box, and cleaned the mess from the edge of her desk. She left her office and went to the break room, where several other employees gathered, all trying to share one small fan.

"If they don't turn on the air conditioning soon, we will strike," she said.

The others agreed.

"Sylvia," she asked her friend. "I'm going to ask you for something that I haven't needed or wanted in years. Do you have any aspirins to spare? Extra strength would be great."

"You got a headache?" Sylvia asked, opening her purse. "I thought you and Jeff were fine?"

"We are. I've got a headache because I'm madly in love with John Bennington, and I can't tell him yet."

She popped the aspirin into her mouth and paused with the water glass a few inches away. She moved her eyes slowly around the silent room, observing raised brows, gaping mouths, and mischievous grins. Then, she felt her cheeks grow suddenly hot, and the aspirins began to dissolve, creating a nasty taste in her mouth. She took a drink and covered her eyes with one hand.

“Why did I say that?” she asked timidly. “I don’t believe I said that. I really don’t.”

She left the room without finishing the sentence, since it would not matter if she explained. She returned to the hot office, sat at her desk, and breathed deeply until she regained control.

“You’re losing it,” she said. “This heat is going to make you snap. You love John? Wow. I didn’t know that.”

She went to the window, stared at the people walking across the street, and wondered why she said what she did.

“Go!” came the command inside her head. “Go quickly!”

“What? Where?”

“*Virginia’s in danger. Go!*” came the tiny whisper and the incredible, irresistible urge to leave the building.

She grabbed her purse and rushed to the lobby. She told the receptionist to reschedule her clients if they showed up and left the building at a quick gait. She pulled onto the street from the parking lot without looking and ignored the blowing horn and squealing tires of the car which avoided the accident.

“Wow! I’m going already. Calm down, okay?”

Virginia dozed, and Dozen jumped on the bed. It startled her awake, and her daughter kissed her on the nose.

“Hey, Dozen,” Virginia yawned. “How are you?”

“I’m six, ‘most seven. Next year, I’ll go to school all day.”

“Don’t rush it, sweetie. Enjoy your life.”

“Dozen has more energy than three monkeys,” she said, hugging Virginia’s head.

“Who told you that?”

“Paula. I got to go, Mommy. I just wanted to say I love you.”

“Thanks,” Virginia smiled. She waved as Dozen disappeared out the door.

She yawned and closed her eyes again. “I don’t know why I’m so lazy today,” she mumbled.

Moments later, a shrill scream came, shattering glass and an enormous crash that shook the entire house.

Paula’s shriek followed mere seconds later. “Dozen! Dozen? What happened?”

Virginia’s eyes shot open. “Paula? What is it?”

She received no answer and lay filled with dread as she heard the back door slam and Paula running through the rooms downstairs.

“Dozen? Speak to me? Where are you?”

Virginia panicked. “Paula? Oh, damn. This can’t happen now.” She saw the dialing monitor lying on the dresser across the room. “Shit,” she said and hit the bed with her fists. “Paula?”

“Dozen?” yelled Paula once more. “Oh, no! Dozen?”

Paula stood in the doorway of the living room and viewed the mess. The China closet lay on its face with dishes, cups and glasses strewn across the dining room. From under the top, she could see one small hand sticking out. She screamed once more and ran to the closet, grabbed at the edge, but she could not budge it.

“Dozen?” she called and touched the hand. It moved slightly. “Dozen? Are you okay there?”

“Pain,” came the faint voice. “Hurt.”

“Oh shit,” said Paula. She took a deep breath and caught the China closet with both hands behind her back. She strained, but it did not move.

“Hang on, Baby,” she said and ran to the phone. She dialed 911 and ignored Virginia’s yelling. She told the dispatchers where to come and asked for an ambulance and someone to help move the China closet. She ran to the door and looked around the neighborhood. The neighbors on both sides of them were on vacation, and no one walked the streets. She thought of going to houses for help, then decided she could not leave Dozen alone.

Upstairs, Virginia grew more fearful, and the frustration of not being answered fed the panic. Finally, she jerked the sheets down and hit her legs with her right hand.

“Move, damn you!” she yelled. “Dozen needs you there, not here.”

She hit them again, and they slid over the edge of the bed, dragging her with them. Finally, she hit the floor facing the wrong way, on her stomach. She shoved herself up with her hands and grabbed the bed frame. She inched until her body faced the right direction and dragged herself along the floor with her elbows. She reached the top of the stairs before the muscles gave out and forced her to stop momentarily. She lay there crying and praying to move and to help her daughter.

Paula returned to the china closet, kicked some broken glass out of the way, and lay beside the hand. She touched it, and it closed on her finger.

“Hang on, Dozen,” Paula said. “Help is on the way. Hold on.”

Jacob came inside and looked at Paula and the China closet. “Where’s Dozen?”

“She’s under it. Come over here and talk to her. She’s afraid, and she needs you to talk to her.”

He hurried to her side. “Don’t worry, Dozen,” he said, tapping the closet’s top. “You’ll be okay. Where are you?”

Dozen stopped crying when he touched her grasping hand.

“Hurt, Jacob. I’m wet. Very soaked.”

Jacob looked confused and worried. “You pee?”

“No. On my stomach. It hurts a lot. Hold my hand.”

Paula shivered and left a moment to watch for the ambulance. She heard the siren when she looked outside and saw Julie’s car swerve around the corner and turn into the driveway.

“Move farther up!” she called and motioned with her hands.

Julie did and left the car quickly.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Dozen,” said Paula, pulling her inside. “The China closet fell on her.”

“Oh, no!” Julie said and beat Paula to the dining room.

She went straight to the closet and checked it. “Is she talking at all? Is she conscious?”

“She says she’s wet, and her stomach hurts,” Paula said.

Julie threw her purse aside and bent down backward. She put her fingers under the edge of the closet, prayed for strength, and pushed up with her legs. She felt relieved when the heavy cabinet moved.

“Pull her out,” she said, her voice shaking from the strain of her muscles pulled tight to the limits.

Paula caught Dozen’s wrist, reached underneath, grabbed the other arm, gripped both firmly, and slowly pulled Dozen from under the closet. When her feet were clear, she let go of the hands, which fell limp to the floor.

Julie released her grip, and the closet crashed again. She knelt on one side of Dozen and Paula on the other. Julie checked the pulse on her neck and found an erratic beat, but enough to keep her alive. One intense cut ran across her stomach, and it oozed blood. One large piece of a

broken drinking glass wedged into her left shoulder, just above her heart. There were cuts and red bruises that would darken all over her arms, legs, and face. She figured her right leg and arm were broken without touching her.

"Don't touch it," she told Paula, stopping her from pulling out the glass. "If it's in an artery or vein, it might hurt her worse. It's not bleeding much, so leave it. Get something to put across her stomach wound and keep it wet."

*

Virginia moved downstairs on her elbows and stopped when exhaustion overcame her near the bottom. She heard Julie talking to Paula.

She took a deep breath, prayed, and concentrated on her waist and legs. The left one jerked around, and both legs flipped around and down the stairs. She caught the railing with both hands, pulled herself up, and gripped it tightly. She took another deep breath and screamed.

"JULIE!"

Julie raced to the hallway and looked at Virginia, gripping the railing. Virginia's face was white, and Julie thought her near shock.

"How did you get here?" she asked, stepping to the stairs.

"Forget me, damn it! Will someone tell me what's wrong with Dozen?"

Julie moved swiftly and grabbed Virginia before she fell. She leaned her against the wall and held her for a moment.

"The china closet fell on her. She's alive, and she'll be okay."

Virginia cried. "Why wouldn't anyone talk to me? That terrified me, and I made it here out of total fear and love for Dozen. Are you sure she's alive?"

"Yes, her heart's beating, and she talked before. She's unconscious right now. The ambulance is here. I must go. I'll be right back."

She left and fussed around the attendants until they had Dozen on the ambulance. She turned back to the kitchen to find Virginia near the middle of the room.

"I want to go! Don't even try to stop me."

Julie fought her frustration and turned to the attendants. "Can you put her mother in there also?" she asked. She looked at their confused looks.

"We need to be on the road, lady," one said.

"Come on," Julie motioned. "I'll follow you and take over at the hospital. I can't get her back inside by myself."

The men scratched their heads and went inside the kitchen again. They picked up Virginia and put her in the ambulance with Dozen.

Julie instructed Paula to call John's office and tell him what happened.

Virginia hooked her left arm around a brace on the wall inside the ambulance and held herself upright. She watched as the attendant in the rear checked her blood pressure and her eyes repeatedly.

When they neared the hospital, Dozen opened her eyes. "Where's Mommy?"

Virginia stretched out her right hand and caught Dozen's right hand.

"I'm here, Dozen."

"I hurt, Mommy. I've seen angels. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Virginia said. "If you hurt, say it and cry if you want. It's okay."

"Do you still love me?"

“Of course, I love you, Dozen.” She strained, but she could not get close enough to kiss her. The attendant moved his hand from Dozen’s arm and held Virginia, pushing her close enough to kiss her daughter.

“Thanks, Mommy,” she said. “It’s good to see you out of bed and close to me.” She closed her eyes then, and the attendant placed Virginia back on the side.

“Be strong, Baby,” Virginia said.

The ambulance turned into the emergency entrance and backed up to the doors. The attendants moved Dozen out and took her inside the hospital.

Virginia sat waiting at the back when they returned to the ambulance, so they put her in a wheelchair. Julie arrived, as promised, and took charge of her. Together they waited for the news.

“Are you okay?” Julie patted Virginia’s hand.

“Yes. I am now. That was scary.”

Julie regarded her. “Yes, but that might be the thing that was necessary to push you over the edge.”

“You got that right. I pushed myself over the edge of the bed and the stairs both. I just had to reach Dozen. I think I would have died there if I hadn’t tried.”

“How do they feel?”

She shrugged. “They don’t. They hurt once in the final flip on the stairs, like someone jerked them so hard that the muscles stretched a mile, but not now.”

The doctor who examined Virginia came out. “Are you Virginia’s mother?”

“Yes. How is she?”

“She’s fortunate, ma’am. She must have had an angel watching over her. Unfortunately, her right leg is broken, and her left forearm is fractured. The glass in her chest is near a major artery. However, it’s not close enough to worry about. It will come out with no problem, but it will require minor surgery. It’s wedged tight between two bones. The cut across her stomach is strange. It was caused by pressure. If it was a slash, she wouldn’t have made it here. The wound stopped about an eighth of an inch from entering the abdominal cavity.

“I’d like to do a CT scan on her, though, to make sure there isn’t internal damage that the x-rays won’t show.”

Virginia sighed and visibly relaxed. “Then do it. Thank you. That is good news, really. Is she awake?”

“No, she fades in and out. I want to give her a low-level sedative after she comes back from the CT scan. I’ll do that before we set her bones. I’m sure she’ll be perfect, Virginia. You can see her when she comes out of the operation.”

At six o’clock that afternoon, Virginia sat beside Dozen, and John stood on her other side. She slowly opened her eyes and blinked.

“Mommy?” she said.

“I’m here, Dozen. I haven’t left. How do you feel?”

“I’m not hurting. Do you ever dream?”

“Yes, I dream,” Virginia smiled. “Were you dreaming right now?”

Dozen’s head moved. “She’s a wonderful woman. Her face is like shining gold. She said I wouldn’t hurt too long.”

“Good, Dozen.”

“She said to tell you that you did very well, and you’ll be ready soon. She said you were prepared now to know a huge love.”

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. “Yes,” she said and opened her eyes.

“How was she dressed?” asked John.

Dozen thought. “It’s a huge white dress with many layers of blue silk and lace between them. Like me, she has red hair and blue eyes, but her skin is so white. She has an umbrella, but it’s not raining. She has gold things and flowers in her hair.”

Virginia stroked her hair. “Okay,” she said. “You rest now. You can talk later.”

Dozen smiled. “Soon, Mommy. I can’t say the word. L, a, b, y, r, i, n, t, h. Do you know that?”

Virginia frowned as she put the letters together in her mind. “Labyrinth?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, Mommy. That’s good. She said the first one of the remaining two is there in that place. She said it was a very bad one. She said to be careful and use a needle.”

Virginia frowned again. “My daughter too?” She shook her head and chose not to say the following sentence.

“I want to sleep now,” Dozen said, closing her eyes. “Please touch me like you did in the kitchen.” Her face adopted a lovely, enraptured expression.

“I love you too,” she whispered and slept.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Dozen arrived home to a party, and Virginia, Julie, Paula, John, and Jacob all signed her cast. She was lucky to have sustained no major internal injuries except the bones.

“Remember, Dozen,” Paula told her. “There will never be presents on top of anything in the house. No more climbing.”

“Yes! No more climbing.”

Dozen tapped Virginia’s leg. “Mommy, Elizabeth said you need to be ready soon. But, first, you should find a needle.”

Virginia grew apprehensive but told her, “I’ll do that.”

“Her name was Elizabeth?” asked John.

“Yes, Daddy. She said you know where she started.”

John pondered the question. Inside his mind, he viewed the page in the dictionary. “She was Queen Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. Yes, I remember now. That’s where the colony of Virginia got its name.”

Virginia went to her downstairs room and turned on her computer. She took the dictionary from the shelf and looked up the word labyrinth.

“A maze. Where the Minotaur was confined. The Minotaur, a half-man and half-bull, was killed by Theseus. A puzzle. A baffle. A cryptogram. Anagram. A boggle. I agree with that synonym. It’s boggling the labyrinths of my mind. Ponder. Consider.”

She paused and looked up. “The labyrinths of my mind? The first one waits there. We, Julie, and I, discussed a trip to see Sarah Johns. She has a problem in her mind. It’s a labyrinth. Is she locked in a labyrinth? What’s the first one?”

“Julie,” she called.

Julie came to the door.

“Where’s Sarah Johns, and did we get permission to visit her?”

“She’s in Berkwood West, near Newark. I talked to her husband, Richard, who said she’s housed on a local restricted ward, so we can go anytime. When are you free?”

“Anytime, but I think I need to do more research and maybe find a needle in a labyrinth first.”

Julie raised her eyebrows. “That was deep, Virginia. When you’re ready, let me know.”

Virginia returned to her computer, activated her modem, selected a number, and pressed the enter key. Her modem chirped, and soon, the screen came to life. She started typing.

“Hello, Dave. Are you in?”

“Yes.”

“This is Virginia Rose, and I need some help, my friend. I want hack into Berkwood West computer system, a private mental home near Newark. Can you assist?”

“With or without detection?”

“Without.”

“You’re difficult. Wait a moment.”

“I’m difficult? You don’t know the half of it, Dave,” she said to the screen.

“Wait until 2256 hours and then access the modem. Use code 934CN. Password is not required. Will list patients and staff, literal names only. No personal info is available. What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know yet. Could be a person or a problem. Are there any medical bulletin boards I can tap, legal or otherwise?”

“Concerning what?”

“Drugs, the good ones used on mental hospital patients.”

“Try Labyrinth Medical Board, 215-349-1966.”

Virginia’s eyes widened. “That’s interesting. I’ve been looking for the meaning of a labyrinth. It’s a key to the problem.”

“You’re a-maze-ing, Virginia.”

“Thanks, Dave. See you later.”

She wrote the number down and hit the exit key. The program asked for a number, and she entered it.

The screen presented a lovely symbol of two pills and a syringe.

“The needle. Yes. The needle of a syringe, but why?”

The screen cleared and asked for a user code, if any was assigned.

Virginia pressed the enter key, and the screen cleared. The next screen said she could browse and obtain information only but could not order unless she applied for a user code and received a Federal ID number. The screen cleared shortly, giving her a menu for drug categories and applications. She chose drug categories, and the screen cleared and returned with a table of usage by alphabet. She looked at a few of the words. Psychotics, Sedatives, Narcotics, and Nonprescription. She selected Psychotic, and the screen listed several drug types and their general usage and dosages. An option was listed for details, drug interactions, side effects, and withdrawal symptoms.

Virginia shouted, “Bingo! Now, what do I do?”

“Virginia Rose One,” she whispered. “I realize the difference between being dependent and submissive. I think I’m disciplined and ready for you. If you agree, give me the guidance, and let’s do it.”

She ran the cursor down the lists of unfamiliar drugs, paused it on Thorazine, pressed the enter key, selected side effects first, and read them all. She next chose drug interaction and withdrawal symptoms.

Following that, she went to the dosage screen for different problems.

“Hmm,” she said. “I recall the name, but I didn’t know it could be used for things other than schizophrenia.”

She backed out to the drug screen and continued her cursor running over the list. The second time around, she stopped on Lithium.

“Okay,” she said. “What are you for?”

She ran through the same sequence for that drug. “So, you’re used for depressed people, huh? I’m glad that I never snapped that far down the tubes.”

She returned to the first screen in the drug usage section and scanned the Narcotic list, stopping on heroin. She read about that and then went through the sedatives. She read nothing there. She backed out of the program and signed off the bulletin board, leaving a thank you note.

Virginia turned off the monitor and started doodling on paper. She thought of a good cartoon and sketched one of a giant syringe named HEROIN chasing two children. The syringe coaxed and pleaded, and the children would not listen. She laid the paper aside and drew a maze on a blank paper. She followed the lines until she grew dizzy from the intense gaze. She moved herself to the bed in the corner and yawned intently.

“When all else fails, read and take a nap.” Then, through a series of moves with her arms, she put herself in the bed and lay back on the pillows. She yawned and looked at the door as it opened.

“Hello, John,” she said. “What can I do for you?”

“Nothing. Just stopped to say I love you.”

“I didn’t know that. Really? How much do you love me?”

He kissed her. “Enough. Always enough and then some.”

He ran his hands through her hair. “Are the Virginia Roses working through you now?”

“I think so. All I will have to do is piece things together. Thanks for teaching me and coaching me on all the work you did. I didn’t realize there was such a long legacy. It makes my head spin sometimes thinking about it. However, that was what I was waiting for. I’ll be mainlining on them soon. That’s what I long to do.”

Virginia walked through a maze. It towered above her as far as she could see. The two sides looked like they met at the top of the sky. She walked and shivered because the sunlight could not penetrate the maze. She occasionally had to stop and decide on which way to go. She hoped her choice would let her outside soon because she needed to leave. The maze walls gradually lowered until they were the same height as she. Finally, the wooden texture faded into a hedge on both sides that finished the maze. She made one last turn and stopped short. She backed up as the fear of death overwhelmed her. The hedges on both sides leading to the exit were lifeless, not the usual cycle at the end of summer or autumn, but another kind of death from which there would be no return.

A hand hit her back, moving her forward against her will. She resisted at first, then decided to run. She stumbled and fell against the right hedge. They disintegrated, and ashes formed a cloud around her. She covered her mouth and nose and closed her eyes. She tried to stand and reach the exit without breathing. She fell again, and she could not help breathing in. Her mouth and nose filled with gray ashes and dried instantly. She tried to spit, and only the ashes came out. She made one last lunge and cleared the opening in the maze.

She fell to the ground, spitting and blowing her nose. She rose to her hands and knees and saw a stream to her left, crawled to it, and drank some of the clear water. She washed her face and hands and turned toward the maze. The maze crumbled from the outside inward.

When the last of the tall walls came down, resting on a table of oak was a large female breast with the nipple oozing a milky liquid.

“Wow,” Virginia said as her eyes snapped open. “That was a mega tit. I’d hate to carry around two of those babies; 500 Q if I’m not mistaken.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Virginia woke again, put herself back in the wheelchair, wheeled herself through the downstairs rooms, and found them empty. She called and got no answer. It was 5:21 p.m.

“Well, I guess everyone went to dinner without me. No problem. So long as they didn’t weld the fridge shut, I’ll make it.”

She went to the kitchen and refrigerator, but before she opened the door, she heard the children outside and the car doors slamming.

Paula came in, followed by Jacob and John carrying Dozen.

“Hi, my love,” he called. “I cooked Chinese for tonight. Is that okay?”

She laughed. “Sure is, babe. Come on in.”

“Did you enjoy a beauty nap?” asked Jacob. “You look prettier.”

“Gosh,” said Virginia. “You’re learning flattery at a young age.”

He cocked his head and grinned. “Yep, I’m going to make girls go all mushy and cry and things like that.”

Virginia glanced at John. “Did he learn that from you?”

“I’m not certain, love,” he said. “Maybe it’s the old television shows he’s been watching.”

They all gathered around the table, and John said grace.

“This is good stuff,” Virginia said shortly. “What is it?”

“Just vegetables and roast duck over rice.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” she said.

She drank some water and began to rearrange the vegetables around the pieces of meat and make a crude maze. Then, finally, she paused and cautioned herself to stop doodling with food.

“Are you okay?” John asked.

Virginia started eating again.

“Yes,” she said shortly. “I’ve just been lost in thought. I’ve got this cartoon running around my head. I’ve been making some rough sketches of a syringe filled with drugs that chases children. Nobody Says No To Mr. Drug, it will say when it sticks them. It puts in drugs and pulls out their brains.”

“That’s gross,” said Paula. “Anyway, we’re eating. You told us not to talk like that at the table.”

Virginia twisted her mouth and turned her head away. “I’m sorry.”

A moment later, she apologized again.

The conversation resumed slowly, and Virginia remained silent as she ate. She stayed at the table with John when the children left.

“Do you know anyone who has diabetes?”

“Yes. Dave Long’s wife, Lydia, has it. She injects herself with insulin and tests herself all the time. Why?”

“Well, I sort of need a syringe, and I don’t want to have to go to the hospital and steal one. Furthermore, I don’t want to buy a whole box for just one or two. Besides, they’re controlled items. I would need a prescription.”

“Why do you need that?”

She shook her head. “The next time I marry, I won’t choose a lawyer. They ask far too many questions.”

When he refused to answer, she spoke. “You’ve followed Virginia Rose One and have done some weird things, honey. You’ve scared me, worried me and I let you do what she guided you

to do. I'm not going to question her. I would also appreciate not being questioned so much about what I'm doing. It's my turn now. I'm not going to do anything illegal."

"Okay. That's true. I'm sorry that I asked so many questions. Maybe I get too overprotective of you. I don't want to be pulled out of court like I was once. So, be careful, okay?"

She grasped a hand. "I love you, and I'll be careful. I promise. When I reach the part where I need your help, I'll come rolling. The same goes for when I get the right information."

*

Julie made room in her schedule and took Virginia to Berkwood West. Several times she asked Virginia if she could handle the atmosphere. Virginia grew irritated, but once inside and past the doors on the third floor, she realized why the questions arose. The air seemed filled with hopelessness, coldness, and a dread of not dying soon enough. She watched people talking to themselves and staring at spots on the wall. She smiled at the ones who looked at her and realized that they probably did not see her.

Their eyes were dead and lifeless. She took a deep breath, sighed, and said nothing until they were ushered to the community room on the floor, and she saw Sarah Johns.

She rolled her chair to the table where Sarah sat, staring at her folded hands on the table top. She stopped beside her chair and touched Sarah's face.

"Sarah Johns," she smiled. "How are you?"

It took several moments before Sarah turned slowly to look blankly into Virginia's eyes. She blinked a few times and frowned. She opened her mouth a few times, but she said nothing.

"Sarah, I want to thank you for helping me before. I know I was rude and hateful to you the last time you came to see me. I'm sorry about that day and I want you to forgive me. I'll do what I can to help you, Sarah."

She touched Sarah's forehead and ran her fingers across her right cheek.

Julie watched from across the room and sadly shook her head.

Once more, Sarah's mouth opened. She wet her lips and her lower lip moved back under the upper. She made a buzzing sound several times and ended up drooling.

Virginia took a tissue from her purse and wiped Sarah's mouth as she thought intently.

"Are you trying to say my name?" she inquired.

"Es," Sarah responded. The corners of her mouth twitched up once and then her face relaxed again.

"God, strengthen me, and don't let me break until I'm out of this place," Virginia prayed.

"Sarah, go to your room. Go now."

Virginia looked at her entire body while she stood. Something was out of place, and it irritated her. She turned and saw Julie talking with one of the two nurses. She glanced at some of the other patients, and they all watched the black-haired nurse when she left Julie and went to one of the rooms. The patients' relief was noticeable when she left their view. She turned around and watched Sarah shuffle into a room, three doors down on the left. She wheeled herself after Sarah and paused outside the door to count the people. There was one male guard at the entry, two nurses and one that was the floor manager. She remembered no one else besides patients.

Julie joined her. "See what I meant?" she asked.

Virginia nodded. "Yes. May I ask a favor of my husband?"

"Name it, and you got it."

“Well, I’d like you to entertain these poor, hurting people here. Bring a little joy to them, even though some will not know it.”

Julie instantly frowned at the request.

“You’re an actress, Julie, and you’re probably a little schizoid when you’re doing a movie. But I also know you can sing and dance. So light up their lives with a song and dance routine to give me some time alone with Sarah.”

“The next wife I have will not make that demand on me,” Julie said. “You know I don’t like doing that. What are you up to?”

“Trust me. You’ll like doing it this time. I promise you that this will be the most wonderful performance of your life. Never will you leave this hospital or remember this day with any regrets.”

Julie sighed. “Okay, love. Even without the pumping of my ego, I’d do it for you. Go on and visit with her. Do what you must.”

Julie went to the center of the room and clapped her hands. “Hey, folks! Come on over here. Gather around me. I’ve been in Hollywood before.” She pointed to one man who approached in a slow shuffled gait. “And my friend here has asked me to sing a few songs. Would you like that?”

Virginia smiled and went inside Sarah’s room. Sarah stared out the window but turned when Virginia spoke to her. She met her in the middle of the room and lowered her face until her nose touched Virginia’s. Then, she straightened and looked at her, empty, quiet, and expectant.

Virginia sat up in her chair and held out a hand. Sarah took it.

Virginia slid up the sleeve of her pajama top and saw many needle spots. She did the same for Sarah’s left arm and there were more there.

“You can’t talk?” Virginia asked.

Sarah’s lips formed a circle.

“Are they giving you many drugs?”

“Es,” Sarah hissed as vehemently as she could.

Virginia felt like putting the woman on her lap and taking her home with her, but she realized the folly of that move. She would never make it off the floor.

“Please trust me. I’m here to help you.” She opened her purse and took out her two syringes that she obtained from Lydia. Sarah moved the right sleeve of her robe above her elbow. Virginia smiled and tore open the plastic on the first one and found a vein. She pushed the needle in and paused.

“Let this go well, Lord,” she whispered.

She pulled back on the plunger, and the tube filled with blood. She put it inside her purse and did the same with the second syringe. Finally, she closed her bag and placed it under the blanket around her legs.

“Sarah, if you can understand me, hang tough. I’ll do all I can to get you out of here. I feel guilty about you being here, and I’m going to do my best. I love you.”

Sarah shuffled across the room and stood beside the calendar. She moved one shaky finger and touched a yellow flower in the picture. She made a noise with her mouth. “Ek.”

Virginia wheeled to her. “What?”

The finger touched the yellow flower.

“The yellow flower? You like it?”

Sarah touched her black hair and moved her hand back to the flower. “Ek.”

Virginia felt frustrated for not understanding, but she nodded at Sarah.

“Okay, Sarah. Thank you.”

Sarah went back to the door and waited. She opened it when Virginia approached and went out in front of her. She joined the other people and the nurses who stood and sat around the floor, listening to Julie sing.

Virginia moved along the outside wall to the left and waited until she finished the last song. She checked the nurses and patients and saw no yellow flowers and no one with yellow hair except Julie. The audience responded with grunts, claps, and howls. Virginia figured that even if they could not understand the words, they could appreciate the love coming across.

“You said a mouthful, sweetheart,” Virginia Rose One said. “Glad you’re waking up.”

Julie bowed and told them she had to go. The man who first approached her stood and held out his hands. Julie took one and kissed it.

He cried as he left her, and Virginia witnessed her fighting back the tears.

Sarah moved across the floor, bent her face again to touch Virginia’s, and then shuffled away.

Julie said goodbye to the nursing staff, and Virginia did too. They invited them back anytime and thanked Julie for the entertainment.

Virginia sat in silence for a time, lost in thoughts over the emotional impact Berkwood West had on her.

“Julie, where would be a good place to have some blood work done?”

“Kent General, of course,” Julie said.

“I mean for more specific testing, like drugs being used.”

Julie glanced at her. “What specific drugs?”

“Thorazine, lithium, and possibly heroin,” Virginia said.

“You on those?”

“Don’t be silly,” Virginia said. “If I were, I’d be back in Berkwood with the gang.”

Julie slowed the car, pulled off the road, and turned to Virginia. “What’s this about?” she demanded. “Talk to me.”

“Did you pay any attention to Sarah?” Virginia asked.

“Yes, I did. Why?”

“Did you notice anything peculiar?”

Julie scrunched up her face. “Not really. Why? What’s the point?”

Virginia sighed. “You’ve become accustomed to working with people like that. That’s the point. You told me that she lay down in silence and remained that way, right?”

“Yes, because that’s the truth.”

“Well, why do they have her on Thorazine if that’s the case? If I’m not mistaken, they also probably have her on some other drugs. She has needle puncture marks and burst vein tracks from the fluid injections in both arms. She was deemed lost and docile, so why the drugs and intravenously? You also overlooked her breasts. They’re much larger than before, and they’re leaking. She’s secreting milk, and she can’t have children. She shuffles when she walks, and her feet have spontaneous muscle spasms. She drools and is speechless except for basic noises. What more evidence of Thorazine do you need?”

Julie whistled and sat back behind the wheel. “I see what you mean. Excuse me for snapping. Maybe you’re right. I accepted that she was lost, so I never looked closer. I just saw her as the other patients.” She stared out the windshield a moment. “It might be rough to get a

blood sample to test. We'll have to talk to Richard when we get home. I'm sure we'll come up with something."

"Wouldn't a court order be better?" asked Virginia.

"Of course, but for what?"

"Why would anyone want to give a combination of drugs to a patient?"

"Murder?" Julie asked, shocked at saying it. "The people we met there didn't seem the type. Are you okay? You're so far into the positive side of rehabilitation that you should be stable."

Virginia shrugged, opened her purse, and lifted out one of the syringes. "I am stable. However, we need to drop this off and get the wheels rolling, darling. Humor me, this once?"

Julie set her face hard and drummed the steering wheel with the fingers of both hands.

"You're an imp. You're devious, cunning, sly, and I guess that's why I love you."

Virginia smiled broadly. "Med Lab, here we come. Mr. and Mrs. Sherlock Holmes need your service."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Virginia sat in Julie's office talking to one of Julie's disturbed clients. The girl first ignored her, but later she changed and listened to what Virginia said. The change in her attitude was evident when the session ended, and she stood to leave. She said goodbye and told Julie she would try to leave the drugs alone. Finally, she thanked Virginia and left.

"She's never said that before," Julie said. "She's the most difficult girl I have here. She's very defensive, but maybe you got through to her. Never once has she said thank you."

Virginia sighed. "She could wear you out. I once thought psyches had it easy, just listening to people. Now I think differently."

Julie called the receptionist.

"You had three phone calls, Julie," she said. "All three were John Knight from Med Lab. He sounds upset and insists you call him before your next patient."

"Thanks, Marsha," Julie said. "Hey, Sherlock Virginia, this is the call we're waiting for."

Julie turned on the speakerphone and placed the call. "Hello, John Knight," she said momentarily. "What's the word?"

"Where'd you get that blood sample?"

"From a woman in a private hospital, why?"

"Because I want to know why they want to kill her. There's an overdose of Thorazine, but it's being altered into different side effects. You can see the changes in the chemical composition. I don't know the effect, but you can expect much damage. Lithium is the drug causing the alteration, which should never be given simultaneously. Lithium and Thorazine are used for two very different disorders. However, what I don't understand is the heroin."

Virginia remembered the cartoon about putting drugs in and taking the brain out. "You can't say no to Mr. Drug," she said.

"It's probably for the addiction factor to keep her hooked on the injections. She's a knowledgeable woman and works with drugs in her duty, so she would know what would happen to her. However, the heroin would prevent her from fighting the ones that would do the severest damage. When I opened the package to take the syringe out, she pulled up her sleeve, ready for the needle."

"That's right," John said. "That's probably true."

Virginia thought again, and her mind flashed through the maze dream, the crumbling, the dryness, and the giant breast leaking.

"Mr. Knight, could the combined effects stop the enzyme secretions in the brain? The ones concerning memory, motor functions, and then emotional response? That would be a living death, right?"

There was silence, and the two women heard him talking to someone in the background.

"That's probably the truth," he said a moment later. "Who's that speaking? You're not Julie."

"I'm Virginia Rose. Do the enzymes we speak of stay within the limits of the brain?"

"Yes, they would."

"If they didn't, could they be siphoned away through the lymphatic system, the blood stream or say the lactose system in the breasts?"

The side conversation came again.

"I don't know. No one here ever thought of it."

“Would they, or could they be checked from a sample of lactose?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr. Knight,” Virginia said. “I’d like for you to sit on this for one day until I can get the wheels rolling at this end. I’ll call you for a meeting soon. Can you do that for me?”

“You can count on it. I’ll help as much as I can.”

Julie said goodbye, hung up the phone and stared at Virginia with admiration. “Brilliant! Are you trying for my job?”

No, I like helping you here sometimes and doing this to help Sarah, but I don’t want to do this for a living.”

“You can do it for free,” Julie suggested. “I did it in Hollywood. It was all driven by love and more love.”

Virginia sat pensively and drummed her knees. “Perhaps, when I experience the big love like Dozen said I would.”

“What now?”

“Well, I go talk to my boyfriend, John Bennington. I’ll ask for his assistance in taking this to the Attorney General’s Office. Then I’ll tell him that my friend was just camping and has not gone for nine months.”

*

John listened to her, and his face grew firmer as she continued deeper into the story. He neared anger when she finished.

“I can see what you say, but why? Also, who? This can’t be just an everyday occurrence. It must be something to do with Sarah Johns specifically. Have you checked the list of patients and employees?”

“Yes, I did that before I went to see her. But nevertheless, I can’t get their personal information on them. I thought the Attorney General might be able to do that through the DELJIS system.”

“You’re too smart. However, I like that in a woman.”

“Do you like it enough to marry me?” she smiled demurely.

“Nah,” he said. “You’re more exciting as a mistress.”

“John Bennington!”

He laughed. “We’ll call David and let him work on this before we go to the DA. I want all the answers when I go there before he asks the questions.”

“When WE go there, John.”

“Yes, right.”

“I’m not pregnant, so you’ll have to work on some good answers for me; like why I am not pregnant?”

“I’ll start working tonight, love.”

John called David, and Virginia went to her downstairs room. She moved herself to the bed and lay back to wait for John. She swiftly slept and dreamed.

Virginia walked happily through a carnival. She pulled off pieces of cotton candy and savored the sweet tacky taste as it dissolved in her mouth.

She paused at each booth and delightfully regarded the barkers.

“Watch as the Bearded Woman wrestles an Alligator that has eaten the last sixty wrestlers!”

“See the amazing 200-pound kangaroo rat!”

She chuckled and walked on but stopped when she saw Jolene.

“Hi, Northern Rose,” Jolene said. “Come over here and watch this game. When you learn to play it, you can win a doll.”

Virginia smiled and hugged Jolene, happy to see her again. She followed her friend, and they stopped in front of a barker with a checkered suit.

He stood behind a small table. Around the booth were many dolls in white dresses. There were many different hairstyles and colors. Virginia observed the man playing the Three Nutshell Game, using two yellow and one black ball.

Virginia handed her cotton candy to Jolene, who immediately devoured a huge piece. Virginia stuck out her tongue and laid a dollar down. She observed the man’s hands, but no matter how closely she watched, she lost and soon grew angry. Finally, she asked Virginia Rose One for help and picked up the black one for the next game. Pocketing the money, the man finally asked her to pick a doll.

All the dolls had black hair.

She felt strange because she knew that they were different from before. She asked Jolene and found her gone. She panicked and looked in all directions and did not find her. It was just her, the man, and the booth of dolls.

“Try your luck, lady?”

She laid another dollar down and picked a yellow ball. The dolls all had yellow hair, and fear crept inside her mind to freeze her. She lay one more dollar down, her last. She picked out the black ball. The second doll and the rest had black hair. She threw them down and backed away from the table, screaming.

“Oh shit!” she yelled. She heard a thump and a groan and remembered Dozen’s accident.

“Dozen? Is that you?”

“No, honey, I’m not Dozen.”

Virginia hit the light switch on the wall by the bed and turned over, to find John on the floor.

“What are you doing there?”

“Just lying around.” He pushed himself up. “You shoved me out of bed. You must have had a terrible dream, or you’re just getting even.”

“The dream? Yes, the dream. We must call David.”

“Why? You can’t mean now. It’s 3:12 a.m.”

“It’s Rebecca Edison, honey, darling. Do you remember her?”

“No.”

“She’s the one who got the information on Judge McNaulty long ago when we first got married.”

“Oh, yes. She works there?”

“Yes, she does, and Elizabeth was right; she’s dangerous. Sarah Johns arrested her after she got the photo of the Judge at Kelly’s. She spent a year in Gander Hill. She had many fights there and had her sentence extended. She was a hellion when she got out. She’s the nurse whom the patients were relieved to see disappear. She’s dyed her hair from blonde to black. Sarah told me, but I didn’t make the connection until now.”

“Now you know what I went through, huh?”

She nodded. “Yes. I’m glad I never bothered you about it. Hang in there, darling. You’re not through yet.”

“You really want to call this early?”

“Yes,” she said. “If I need you to kiss his butt for the disturbance, no problem. You will, won’t you?”

“This is the first time in years you joked like that. Are you back for good?” he asked.

“You betcha,” she said and picked up the phone.

*

Two days later, John, Virginia, Richard Johns, and Julie picked up John Knight and went to the Attorney General’s Office.

“To what do we owe the pleasure?” he directed at Virginia with a smile.

“We bring the pleasure of ferreting a Minotaur out of the Labyrinth. This is my show, Mr. Mansion. I just wanted him to open the door and provide moral support.”

“Okay, I’ve missed your presence, so let’s hear what you have.”

When Virginia finished, he sat back in his chair and sighed. “That is totally awesome, Virginia. What possessed you to do this investigation to this point?”

“The love of Virginia Roses. The main problem is getting Sarah out peacefully or getting to Rebecca first. From what I know of Rebecca, she’s probably staying somewhere in the hospital, and she’ll have her ears everywhere whether she’s there or not.”

George nodded.

Virginia continued. “What we need is a diversion. We need a disabled woman who knows Rebecca and can surprise her enough to let you get between her and Sarah. The staff can’t know what’s going on, or she’ll know.”

“I understand, so we’ll work that out. You have enough evidence for a warrant. Will you file the charge, Mr. Johns?”

“That was a stupid question. I’ll also go in and kill this Rebecca bitch if you can’t figure it out. A bullet in the brain and she’s history.”

“Wait a moment, please,” Virginia interjected. “Hold off on the warrant and listen to my plan. You can’t do it your way. It must be me.”

*

“I wish to protest this, Virginia! There should be a better way.”

“John, we’ve been over it many times, and this is final. Do relax, love. The love of God and the Virginia Roses will keep me from harm. I’ve seen this coming, and it’ll be alright. I must do it. I must. The next one, the last one, will hurt you too. However, it must happen. Trust in God and let it be. He created the Virginia Roses, as he did you.”

John watched Julie wheel her inside the doors of Berkwood West, sighed as if it were his last in life, and returned to the parking lot to wait with the police, the DA, and Richard. They all watched Sarah’s room for the signal.

Virginia wheeled herself from the elevator and to the doors. Julie ambled behind. The guard greeted them and let them pass. They found Rebecca and one other person on duty at the desk.

“We’re here to see Sarah Johns,” Virginia said. She saw her sitting at the same table as before.

“Hello, Sarah,” she called.

“I can’t allow that today, Miss. She’s not feeling well and shouldn’t be disturbed.”

Sarah stood and shuffled toward Virginia.

Rebecca shouted, "Sarah Johns, stop and go to your room!"

Sarah stopped and looked confused. She turned and shuffled across the floor, then down the hallway.

Virginia wheeled herself across the floor, following Sarah. The nurse beside Rebecca moved in that direction. Rebecca tripped her and hit her in the back of the head with her fist. The woman fell and did not rise.

"What?" said Julie.

Rebecca moved swiftly, and a syringe appeared in her hand. She stuck it into Julie's chest and pressed the plunger. Julie stopped, and her eyelids slowly closed, and she fell forward. Rebecca shoved her aside.

"This shit works fast, huh?" she asked as Julie hit the floor. "Only five seconds and BAM! You're in La La Land, whether you like it or not."

She turned and saw Sarah's door close behind Virginia. She intended to follow but never reached the hall before Virginia came back outside.

Virginia looked around and did not find Julie or the other nurse.

"What the hell are you doing, Virginia? You can't leave well enough alone, can you?"

"Your hours are numbered, Rebecca. Your capture or death is a given. So, make it easy on yourself."

"You're full of it, bitch! I wasn't going to bother you because you were disabled, but now I'll have to kill you."

Behind Virginia, the door opened, and Sarah stepped out. She looked at the two women and stopped, staring at the floor.

Rebecca laughed, ran to the nurse's station, filled a syringe with some liquid, and walked back toward Virginia, who had followed her across the floor. She approached Virginia from the right side with the needle ready.

She tried to jab it into the right arm, but Virginia caught the hand with her left and jerked her right wheel backward. The footrests hit Rebecca's ankle, and she collapsed to the floor. The syringe flew a few feet away, and Virginia ran over it, crushing the tube.

Rebecca stood and studied her a moment. "That was good, bitch, but not good enough. The next time you won't have that option. Your fighting it just makes me feel better about killing you."

She ran to the station, filled three syringes, put them on a tray, hurried back to Virginia, and sat the tray on a table.

Virginia moved her wheelchair in a circle, keeping her in constant sight.

Rebecca squealed and suddenly darted in the opposite direction, too quickly for Virginia to compensate. Then, grabbing the handles of the wheelchair, she pushed her forward, stopped a few feet away, and jerked backward.

Virginia went flying from the chair and hit the floor on her back.

Rebecca shoved the wheelchair away and ran to the table. She laughed at Virginia.

"Aw, poor baby, fell down and went BOOM! That is so sad. We'll have to give you a shot for the pain."

Virginia recovered from the shock and looked around.

"God, where's the cavalry? What's keeping them?" she prayed.

She maintained her silence and looked around the room again. The patients were up and walking around, apparently in no order. Then she realized they moved toward her and Rebecca, and she quickly returned her gaze to the woman.

“You’ll not get away with this, Rebecca. I didn’t come here alone.”

“You’ll leave that way, plus you’ll be dead.” Rebecca picked up a syringe and grabbed Virginia’s left leg. “All it takes is a few seconds with this concentration, and you’ll have this nice little heart attack. It’ll hurt something fierce, but it won’t last long.”

“You’re sick,” Virginia said. She felt herself near panic and tears. Then, praying for help, she concentrated on her right leg and opened her eyes.

“I reject your plan, Rebecca.” Her right leg shot up, and the foot impacted the woman in the crotch.

Rebecca gasped and then screamed. She moved a few steps back, dropped the syringe, and stuck both hands between her legs.

“Oh, damn,” she said as her face blanched. “Oh, damn, that hurt.” She dropped to her knees, cursing and moaning.

Virginia propped herself up on her elbows. “Give it up. You’ll not succeed. Let it end.”

“Fuck you!” Rebecca screamed, her face livid with rage. “You’re dead meat! You bitch!” She stood slowly and recovered the syringe she had dropped.

She returned to Virginia’s feet and stood out of the way momentarily.

“The game’s over now,” she said sternly through clenched teeth. “It’s over!”

She moved quickly and sat across Virginia’s lower legs. She held the syringe in her right hand and raised it with her thumb on the plunger.

“Goodbye for sure this time,” she laughed.

Sarah grabbed the raised arm between her limp arms and held it tightly enough for Rebecca to lose balance. Sarah kneeled, and it pulled Rebecca to the floor, face down, laying half across Virginia’s legs.

The other patients arrived simultaneously. Sarah used her knees and placed her body weight on Rebecca’s right wrist and arm. Another patient stepped on her left shoulder, yet another kicked her left arm straight and stood on that hand. One moved her feet around and sat on them. Still, they all stared blankly.

Virginia’s legs were trapped under Rebecca’s weight. She propped herself up again and watched the patients. One man came from behind the crowd and looked from Rebecca to the tray of syringes. He picked up the two from the tray and the one on the floor.

“No. Please don’t do that,” Virginia begged when she realized his intent.

The man tried to speak, but his mouth only moved, and he shook his head. He kneeled by Virginia’s feet and took one syringe in his right hand.

“Stop him, Virginia!” Rebecca begged.

Virginia gazed at the pained look on his face and said nothing. She winced when he stuck the needle into Rebecca’s right hip and pressed the plunger. She felt Rebecca jerk and heard her scream. The man repeated the action with the other two needles. She could see the hurt in his eyes and the relief in the others when Rebecca started into convulsions.

The man stood, pulled up the bottom of his pajama top, and pulled the bottoms down, and Virginia grimaced at the bruises and puncture marks on his genitals and legs. She closed her eyes and turned her head.

“I’m so sorry, sir. That shouldn’t have happened. If she did that, I guess she deserved a reward.”

Almost as one, they all moved back to where they had started and sat silently. The only ones who remained were Sarah and the man who killed Rebecca. Sarah kneeled and put her arms around Virginia, holding her as she had before at Jolene's house. The man remained until the police arrived and confessed.

"I did it. I finally returned the pain to her. She had it coming." He showed the police as he had Virginia.

He pointed to Virginia. "She got her a good one in the crotch. She's a hero." He smiled once, returned to his blank gaze, and wandered away in silence.

Sarah looked up when Richard called her name. She made a movement with her mouth and again stared at the floor. Richard caught her shoulders and lifted her. She released Virginia, and he led her out of the way.

The disabled nurse recovered, and another arrived on the floor to help.

Virginia was concerned about Julie until the nurses explained that she would recover. The syringes were maintained and filled with a fast-acting barbiturate for emergencies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sabob

Virginia strolled up the stairs to the master bedroom. The braces on her legs were cumbersome, but she did not complain about them or the bruises from the leather straps holding them. Instead, she experienced great pleasure from using them and feeling them again after nearly two years.

She dimmed the lights and liked the security and comfort of the darkness. She looked into the mirror and could barely see her face's features.

"Why? Will you please put it together, so I'll understand? This is hurting me."

Virginia One and Virginia Ten appeared, one on each side.

"I don't want this," Virginia said.

"Child, you must," One said.

Virginia wiped at the tears that stung her eyes. "I know it's easy to say something with your mouth, but it's not easy to do. This will hurt a long time if it doesn't work. I can understand taking a leap of faith if you're leaving something behind, like the evil that I did. I'm sorry, but I can't feel the same about this."

Ten placed an arm around Virginia's shoulders. "Daughter, you must come to grips with this. What you need to know can't be given to you yet. What John needs to know can't be given yet. No one will force this on you. You can stop. However, consider this, Daughter, is what you had before John worth more? Is it more pleasurable than what you have now? Is it worth more than what you can have in the future? If it is, then sit here and do nothing."

Virginia considered the statement. "No," she said.

"Trust us. We'll not abandon you," One said.

Virginia surrendered. "Okay. I'll go. Where?"

"Get into the car and follow the guidance, Daughter. You've been there in a dream. You'll recognize it immediately when you reach the spot. We are all proud of you, daughter," soothed Ten.

Virginia retrieved a small suitcase from her closet, packed a few clothing changes, and walked downstairs through the silent house. She went to her office, packed her pencils, sketch pads, and materials in her briefcase, and said goodbye to the room. The children were asleep, and John was in the basement, reviewing arrest documents for two clients. She waved goodbye and crept out the kitchen door.

She stopped at a money machine west of Dover for a withdrawal. She sat in the car for a few moments, and when her eyes cleared, she continued her journey. She finally turned on the radio, trying to take her mind off the turmoil inside her mind. She looked at the clock again, and it read 11:38 P.M.

"John's in the bedroom by now, and he'll. . . Stop it, Virginia."

She drove, thought of where and when she would end the madness, and soon passed a sign for the Bay Bridge. She crossed the Maryland line and headed south on Route 301. Eventually, she composed herself and forced herself to stop the sudden fits of crying.

Near the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, she slowed down. "I've got to cross this alone?" she complained. "I don't like bridges, especially the ones over a bay like this. It's too long and dangerous."

She hit the steering wheel with both hands. "Okay, I'll do it, but I will complain if I want to! It sucks greatly!"

The signs declared no westbound toll, so she increased her speed and crossed the bridge quickly.

She stopped in Frederick, Maryland, and spent the rest of the night in a hotel. She slept fitfully; it was near check-out time before she finally left.

After a late lunch, she continued west on Interstate 70 and pulled off on the first exit in Cumberland, Maryland. She drove slowly and watched the hillside along the exit ramp. A déjà vu feeling of the hillside struck her and left her uneasy. She recalled the one dream of Virginia Rose One where there were flowers and trees and understood she had reached her destination for the moment.

She drove around Cumberland's streets, looking for landmarks that would be easy to remember, and then drove south of the city on a little highway. She found a small hotel with twenty rooms and took one for a week. She muttered at the price, but she still had money in her savings and checking accounts and her money card.

"Very adequate," she declared.

She called Transcom, Incorporated, the agency that handled the distribution of the cartoon Jolene's Corner and her column, The Rose Connection.

"Hello, Bill," she said when she reached her representative. "How am I? Well, right now, very scared, and uneasy. No, I'll get over it soon. Look, I want you to suspend the payments for Jolene's Corner and The Rose Connection. Don't send them to the bank in Dover. That's right. I'll call you tomorrow with a bank account where I am. I don't want anyone to find me, especially John. Yes, I'm serious. Never mind. No, I'm not running away. I'm running to something. Okay, thanks, Bill. Yes, I know John will hurt, and he'll be pissed off, and he'll call you several times, but he'll get over it. Just resist any information for him to locate me. I know. You're a man and I probably suck to you right now. Think about it. Discuss it with your wife, and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

She stretched out across the bed and took a nap.

*

John went to work, but he might as well have stayed home. Instead, he called the house every hour, asking Paula about Virginia. Finally, Paula grew worried about him getting depressed and called Julie.

Julie was swift to respond and hugged the worried girl.

"She didn't say where she was going?" The news shocked Julie that Virginia would leave without a word. "Did the doctors call and say she was pregnant or not? That makes no sense at all."

"No, she's been silent and withdrawn and said nothing. She left sometime last night after we went to bed and before John came from the basement. She said nothing to anyone. She just disappeared."

"That's rude and very odd. Let's go to her room."

She went upstairs to Virginia's bedroom, which still smelled like her. The empty bed gave her chills. It seemed like there was a death, and the sheets were all that remained of her.

Sitting on the bed where Virginia sat the night before, she ran her hands over the wrinkled sheets.

“She sat here last night before she left, and her heart was burdened with sorrow. She was sad and hurt, and she cried a lot. Her mind was full of turmoil and confusion. She didn’t want to go at first, but then she surrendered her will to something much more substantial.”

“How do you know that?” Paula asked.

Julie shrugged. “We bonded very strongly. Sometimes I can tell her feelings when I open the door downstairs or what kind of day she had just by walking into this room. I could do that even if she wasn’t here.”

“That’s all you get now?”

Julie picked up her pillow, pressed it to her face and held it. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and her face contorted for a moment.

“Right now, she’s lonely, very lonely, and crying, but she’s in no trouble or danger. She’s anxious to leave and return home, but the urge to stay there is too enormous. So, she’s waiting there for something.”

“For what? Why can’t she wait here? Where is she? Do you know?”

Julie sighed and tossed the pillow aside. “I don’t know, and I’m sorry, Paula. I hoped I could tell you something specific. I don’t know what to tell you now. I’ll wait and talk to John. Maybe I can calm him down. I hope.”

*

Virginia wandered around Cumberland’s streets, noting the shops and the people.

The people were friendly, and most of them never looked at her legs, or if they did, they made no indication that they did. She found the prices of goods very reasonable, but then she had to figure in the sales tax in Maryland. Still, she thought the prices in that city practical, which she liked, because she did not know how long she would be there. She found a bank that she thought was quaint and located close to the hotel where she chose to stay.

She knew she could walk there and help to strengthen her legs. She sighed and spent a moment thinking about Julie, exercising her legs, and encouraging her mind to live, feeding her massive positive statements and love.

“Julie, I hope this goes well, and I don’t lose John and you in the mix. That would suck greatly.”

She returned to the hotel, and after a rest, she checked her legs for leather burns and bruises and found none. She went in her car, found a place to eat dinner, and then checked the supermarkets. She found one that offered excellent prices and decided to investigate it the next day.

Back in her hotel room, she double locked the door, and filled the tub with hot water. Then, seated on the tub's edge, she removed the braces and rubbed her legs.

“Is this all there is?” she asked and stared at the closed door. “Is there nothing left but this one tiny person in the universe? Is there no one to care about me or what I feel?”

Once again, she resisted the urge to leave immediately and stared at the ceiling.

“God, let me be strong and let this not be the end of me here. I want to live, and I want to love. I want to enjoy You and the people in the world you’ve given me to love and who love me. Please let the world still be there waiting when I finish this assignment. Don’t let everything slip away. For the moment, please stop this pain inside me. It hurts being here alone and not communicating. I feel lost, tiny, and helpless. Help me, please. Stop the pain tearing apart my mind and will, so I can go on in Your name. Amen.”

She lowered herself into the tub, and the water soothed her emotionally. She lay back against the end of the tub, closed her eyes, and relaxed while she thought of the next few cartoons of Jolene.

Virginia Rose One and Ten sat outside the hotel on a wooden bench in the flower garden.

“What are we going to do? She’s made much progress. However, she still lacks enough self-discipline,” Ten said.

“I don’t know,” One said. “I knew she was broken and different from the rest of us. I truly never thought she would come this far. You’re right, of course. Let me think.”

“We must not lose her or this opportunity. We’ve waited so many decades. We must seize the moment now because we might never have this chance again,” Ten reminded her.

One looked cross at Ten and pointed to her right. Ten nodded, moving away from her for a few moments.

“We need to discuss this with Elizabeth,” One said with a critical air that ended the speculation. “I think we should use the obturator and seal her. That would solve all the problems with her and relieve us of all this guilt and stress.”

Virginia Ten worried about that solution. “That might cause too much pain. It might even destroy her will and soul.” A moment later, she sighed and relented. “However, you’re right. Let’s go straight away and see Elizabeth for confirmation.”

Virginia Rose put the braces on her legs loosely and stood, using the sink for assistance. She made it to the bed and finished drying there. She situated her books, drafting pads, and pencils on the bed and nightstand, dressed, and removed the braces for the night.

She sighed contentedly and sketched a few cartoons for Jolene’s Corner. She stopped at 10:10 p.m. and laid them aside. The pile of twenty drafts lay along the foot of the bed and on the floor. She turned out the lights and made herself comfortable.

Elizabeth listened to both One and Ten. Finally, she reached up, idly pulled down a yellow rose, and plucked the flower from the vine. She sniffed it and handed it to Ten.

“I know your concerns, Virginia Ten. We all do. You should realize that, but this must end, and we must do what is necessary. We will do it right, and we will cause no harm. Enough harm has been caused in her life already. She will suffer no longer, and this will permit her strength to accrue for the final conflict.”

Ten bowed her head submissively. “Yes, Elizabeth. I surrender.”

“We will go to her while she sleeps. She’s much less argumentative then, and we will do it before she wakes, and all will be well in her world.”

Three yellow sparks descended through the ceiling of Room 11 at the Paradise Inn in Cumberland, Maryland. They stood beside the bed, and Elizabeth snapped the fingers on both hands.

“Let the dream begin,” she said. “You will both be silent,” she added for the benefit and admonition of Ten and One.

“Virginia Rose Bennington,” Elizabeth said a few moments later. “Sit up.”

Virginia sat on the bed.

“Do you know who I am?” Elizabeth asked.

“You’re the first Virginia Rose from England,” she answered respectfully.

“You have chosen to join us, become one of us, so that we may release the healing that you and the Roses around you need. Is that so?”

“Yes,” Virginia felt a sense of pride and belonging.

“Take my hand because I wish you to accompany me, alone, to a place I visit sometimes. It is serene and unbelievably calm. I want you with me because I wish to teach you something about yourself that you do not know. Will you trust me?”

“Yes,” Virginia answered without reservation.

“Do you love me and wish to follow instructions that I’ll give to you?”

“I love you, and I do,” she responded. She placed a hand inside the one offered by Elizabeth.

The room disappeared in a flash, and Virginia stood on the side of a rocky mountain with Elizabeth. They were far above the trees and looking down the side. She saw they were even above the clouds. No breeze blew to disturb the air, and Virginia became enveloped in a true sense of calm.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, glancing around her to learn the top of the mountain continued upward behind them far beyond sight. “Where is this place?”

“A mountain in the Swiss Alps,” said Elizabeth. “I thought you might like it.”

“I do. This is wonderful. Heavenly.”

“Sit down facing north, please,” requested Elizabeth.

Virginia turned and sat on a rock.

Elizabeth clapped once and commanded, “Obturator, come forth.”

A moment later, she spoke to Virginia. “You asked to become strong, and you asked for the pain you feel to cease. Do you still wish that?”

“I do. I want to do what will help the Roses, but the pain is tearing at me.”

“Then we will work together to stop it. Will that be nice?”

Virginia smiled and relaxed. “Together. Sure, that sounds wonderful.”

“Lean back, child,” Elizabeth instructed.

Virginia leaned back, and her back rested against a large wooden pole.

“Where did that come from? It wasn’t there when I sat down.”

“It is a tool for the Obturator.” She placed her hands on Virginia’s shoulders and began to massage them gently, moving her hands down both arms. “How does that feel?”

“Great. I could go to sleep here.”

“I’m going to move your arms backward until they touch something, Virginia. I want you to grip it if you can.”

She moved both arms behind her until they rested on a horizontal wooden rod. Virginia guessed that it ran through the large post pressing against her back.

“Can you turn the rod with your hands?”

Virginia tried it. “Sure, it’s easy.”

“Excellent, my child,” Elizabeth said. She touched Virginia’s arms with something wet and stood beside her.

“Close your eyes, Virginia. Turn it now. When the pain is gone, stop turning.”

She turned the rod and suddenly screamed and opened her eyes.

“NO! Not that!”

“Look at the clouds and turn the rod, Virginia.” Elizabeth stood behind her and rested her hands on the shoulders again. “Keep turning.”

Virginia's hands turned against her will, and she watched the giant cloud in front of her fill with the faces of John, Paula, Dozen, Jacob, Sarah Johns, and Julie. Then, with each turn of the post, they dimmed from her sight.

"NO! Please, not that way," Virginia begged, but she could not stop her hands. "Oh, please, Elizabeth, make it stop. I don't want to do it this way!"

"Keep turning the rod, child."

Virginia's hands turned the pole, and the cloud vanished from the sky.

"NO!" she screamed again and leaned back into the post, wailing mournfully. "They're gone."

"My dearest Virginia, they are not gone. They are sealed away from you. This will give you time to heal, strengthen, and discover your talents." Elizabeth released her hands.

She moved to the front of the trembling girl and pulled her up. She sat down on the rock, leaned against the post, pulled Virginia onto her lap, and held her like a baby as she spoke gently.

"Fear nothing, Virginia Rose Bennington. You will not be abandoned, ever. They will be back in your life when you are strong and ready. Do you still hurt?"

"Hurt?" asked Virginia. "Who could hurt here on this peaceful mountainside?"

"Then their absence will not interfere with you?"

"Whose absence?" Virginia asked.

"Never mind, then," smiled Elizabeth. "I look forward to the day we will come here again when you beg me to return and reverse what has happened. Do you?"

"Oh, yes, Elizabeth. Thank you."

Virginia took the woman's face in her hands and kissed her. "You are truly an angel."

Elizabeth laughed merrily. "Thanks. Let's go back now."

Virginia gasped and sat up in her bed. "Wow! That was an awesome dream. I wonder who that guy was kissing me? He needs some practice if he is around me in the future. I hope not, though. That red-haired child with blue eyes is all right, but I'd dye her hair. Oh well, I'm glad it's all a dream. I'll keep my eyes open for him and avoid him if I see him."

She looked at the clock, which displayed 3:00 a.m. She lay back down, snuggled into the pillows, and made herself comfortable.

"He probably wouldn't like me with braces and a barren uterus anyway." She went back to sleep.

"Well, is she hurting or damaged?" Elizabeth questioned.

"No, darling," Ten said. "I'm sorry I make a fuss over my baby."

"I'm as bad as you are," Elizabeth confided. "And I've got more babies than you."

She handed Virginia Ten a blue gemstone attached to a gold chain. "All that would harm or interfere are in here. She will function properly while strengthening. Release them when the moment arrives, and then I shall return. Farewell, my daughters." She faded.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Virginia woke the following day and stretched lazily. She reviewed her cartoons, reminded herself of the deadlines, and resolved to mail them on time.

"After all," she told herself as she put on her braces, "they're keeping you alive. You need to open an account here and let Bill know where to send the money without any outside interference. Hope you got brass balls, Bill. You'll need them soon when what's his face calls you." She scrunched her face in thought. "Who is he? I don't recall, but he's a pain in the ass and can't kiss properly, like yuck."

She hummed a song as she inspected her face in the mirror. "I'm here to meet a woman, but why? Who is this stranger who led me from the hot life in Chicago to this desolate place?" she asked herself. She admitted that she lost the woman's address and phone number. She had no idea what the woman looked like; she did not meet her or even had a photograph.

"Well, that makes us even because she doesn't know what I look like either. She's probably just a name-seeker anyway. One interview with me and men all over the world will seek her, date her, bed and wed her. You lucky chick, whoever you are. One dating miracle coming up."

She inspected her face again. "Well, it's you against the world, Virginia Rose. I hope the world has insurance. If not, it's in deep doo-doo. Let's go find someone to do a story on. Anyone. It doesn't matter. We must appease our loyal readers of The Rose Connection."

She stopped at the bank and opened an account first. Then, she sat in restaurants, cafes, and on park benches the rest of the day, talking to different people.

When she grew tired of gathering information on how Cumberland folks lived, she took her car and went to the supermarket.

She chose a shopping cart and walked around the aisles, looking at but not really seeing the products. She stood before the chip section for a long time and finally chose one bag and a small jar of spinach dip. Finally, she reached the end of the market and started on the return trip in the next aisle, picking up a few items. As she turned a corner, she looked back as someone called out a strange name and ran into another cart.

"Why don't you watch where . . ." the woman started to say when she looked at Virginia's leg braces.

"I'm sorry," Virginia said. "It was my fault. I didn't watch where I walked."

"No, that's okay," the woman said. "It was me."

Virginia laughed. "Look, you don't have to give me special treatment because I wear braces. I still have the responsibility to watch where I'm going. So don't let me get away with it."

The woman regarded her. "Look, bitch, if you can't watch where you're walking, stay out of the store. One more time, I'll magnetize your braces and leave you stuck on a store shelf."

Virginia nodded. "Not bad. Stress the word 'stay' and wave your hands next time. Then, pull your brows down and stick out your lower chin. It gives a more dramatic effect."

The woman laughed. "Okay, thanks."

They met again in the next aisle.

"Are you following me?" the woman asked.

Virginia glanced everywhere and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Yes. I'm with the FBI, and we have you under investigation for the crime of love. Are you going to confess?"

"No, I'm not going to confess about love. I haven't seen you here before. Are you brand new to the area?"

"The area is new to me. Were you looking for me?"

"No, I wasn't."

"Such a pity. It seems that wherever I go, no one looks for me. If I go away for a week and come back, would you be looking for me?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Bye." Virginia walked away.

"My name is Susan," the woman called out.

In the checkout line, they talked while waiting.

"So, you don't have a place to stay?" Susan asked.

"I do, but it's going to get expensive. The problem is that I won't get paid until after I finish the story. That's just one of life's little quirks, you know. It takes money to make money."

"Do you want to bet on that?" Susan asked with a mischievous grin.

Virginia thought a moment. "You're on. How can you do it?"

"My house has an empty room, and I have a good-paying job. I don't have to spend much to get myself to work. If I ask you to room with me while you do the story, you will pay me a small rent and provide your own food. I will make money without having it to start with."

Virginia scowled. "All right, you got me there. Put your win on my tab. Are you serious?"

"So long as you can handle the three children," Susan said.

"You have three? You don't look that old."

Susan blushed. "That's a nice compliment, but the rent still is in effect."

"Do I have to handle a husband also?" Virginia asked.

"Fortunately, I'm not married." Susan's face clouded over, and lines of stress wrinkled her brow. "He's an ex-husband, and he's in prison serving three consecutive life sentences."

"Phew! What did he do?"

"A little, no, lots of everything. I'd rather not talk about it, okay? I don't want to be depressed now."

"No problem," said Virginia.

Virginia wrote down her name and room number at the hotel. "Come by the hotel and visit me when the week is near to over. I don't have much to move; I travel light."

*

She left Susan laughing at a joke she told and returned to the hotel. She let her hair down and looked in the mirror.

"Did we do well? I do believe we have found our woman. Now, what do we do with her?"

"What you planned. She's much like Paula but more deeply wounded," came the reply in her mind. "You did extremely well. You have talent of Roses; you just need to apply it. You'll do nicely."

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "It feels wonderful to be a part of you."

She called Bill, removed her braces, and massaged her legs while waiting for the connection.

"Hello, Bill. Yes, I'm much better now, thanks. I have the number if you're ready. 1, 2, 2, 1, 3, 4, 5, 9. The bank is Cumberland First National. Yes, Maryland. Use the direct deposit method."

"John's asking questions, Virginia. What do I tell him?"

“Tell him nothing. I’ve erased that part of my life for a while, a long while. He doesn’t need to find me. I’m tired of being found all the time. Let him stay worried. It’ll help to build his character.”

Bill quit trying. “I’ll do that. You’re acting very strange. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I do, babe. I’ll have the next run in the mail tomorrow morning. Yes, me too. Thank you. Goodbye.”

She pulled her left foot up to where she could kiss it. “Well, little puppy, I think I’ve abused you enough for the moment. So, I’m going to be kind to you and give you a break.”

She took an hour nap.

*

John and Paula finished the dishes and sat on the front porch steps to watch the sun go down. That had become a Sunday ritual since Virginia’s disappearance. Summer was ending, and autumn would soon be upon them. Paula had done well in school, but the work around the house with Dozen and Jacob worried John, who voiced his concern that night.

“I’ll be okay,” she said. “Really, John. Dozen isn’t a problem, and Marlene’s handling Jacob very well. Don’t worry.”

“I have to, Paula. This is getting to me. I know Bill is helping her hide because Jolene’s Corner and The Rose Connection are still running. It’s unnerving, and Bill pisses me off. I’m considering a lawsuit against him.”

Paula grinned and patted his shoulder. “Relax, Uncle John. Something will change soon. I know it will. Like Jolene used to say, ‘I feel it in my bones.’”

While he stared at the street, a long-forgotten white convertible pulled into the drive. He watched Samantha Wilson climb out and saunter toward them.

Paula whistled. “Wow! She’s beautiful, John. Do you know her?”

John remembered her clearly and where they went. She wore green denim shorts and a yellow gauze style blouse. Her hair was styled and tied back with a yellow scarf. She carried a tiny hand purse.

“Hello, John,” she said, offering a hand. “Remember me?”

John sighed from her presence and the past. “Yes, Samantha. What brings you to Delaware from Finland today?”

“You’re the reason I made the trip this time.” She stretched out her arms and cracked the bones in her spine. “Paula, would you excuse us for a while?”

“Go, Uncle John,” Paula smiled demurely and left with the pretense of finding Dozen and Jacob.

“What’s up?” he asked when the door closed.

“You.” She sat beside him and draped an arm across his shoulders. “I’m sorry about Virginia Rose leaving you, but that’s why I’m here. I was sent to fill in for a while. I’m not a Virginia Rose; I’m a Finnish Rose, but I can handle it. Can you?”

He stared at her, disbelieving what he had heard. “No, I can’t.”

“You will. Whenever something negative happens, you walk away from what you need and lose what you’ve found or gained. I’m certain you can handle me and maybe even two of me. I’m quite sure you can deal with any situation that’s presented. I’ll help you deal with the absence of your Virginia Rose. I’ll also kick your butt until you do what you should instead of

moping around. And I'll save you from something that would devastate you. But, of course, that covers only the first two days of our being together. The rest of our time will be fun and games. What do you think now?"

John viewed her stoic face, shook his head, and blinked. Finally, he opened his mouth but could not find the words to speak.

Samantha grinned and patted his cheek. "Starting tonight, and every night afterward, until the sword falls on the final catastrophic night, I am here. You might as well get used to me. It'll make life easier for both of us if you do. You can call the police or anyone you wish, but I'm here to stay, and you know it. So, stop being a sarcastic, scared adult and accept it like you should, with a child's pure innocence and joy."

He gulped and had a flashback of her in the cemetery, exotic and erotic, with the autumn leaves and cold wind whipping her hair around her creamy face.

"Phew," he sighed and turned his eyes away to break the spell.

His voice was shaky and strained. "Samantha, I can't let you stay here. I can't let you replace Virginia Rose. I appreciate the offer, but I just can't. Maybe I'm too faithful. I won't do that until we're together again, or I know she'll never return.

Samantha turned his head and kissed him. "John, for a great lawyer, you're being greatly dense. You've got a lot to learn about life and acceptance." She rubbed the tip of her nose across his, moved back, opened her purse, and handed him her car keys.

"My suitcase is in the trunk. Bring it in for me, please."

John did not move.

She gave him a halfhearted smile and shrugged. "Well, I can wait for a while." She stood and walked into the house.

That evening, Samantha sat on the sofa with Dozen and Jacob, each on one leg of her lap. She held them as they watched a children's movie, talking with them all the time and laughing with them. John sat in the dining room, and his fingers drummed the tabletop. Paula smiled at him every time she passed and did that frequently.

"Will you find a place and sit down for a while?" he finally yelled.

She smiled and sat at the table opposite him. "She's charming and beautiful, John. Where'd you meet her?"

"I found her in a cemetery in northern Delaware. She's a zombie that came out of the grave unexpectedly."

Paula laughed. "You've got a great sense of humor. I think you should let her stay. It's nice to have someone so feminine around, you know."

He shook his head. "I don't know. Are you against me too? I'm afraid I won't be able to behave if she stays around. I want to stay honest and moral."

"May I be profound or would that disrupt your chain of thought?" she asked, regarding him evenly as if she would a peer.

He shivered from a chill in the room. "Are you Virginia Rose One, or are you Paula?"

"I'm Paula. May I speak with complete freedom and not be stopped?"

He nodded and waited.

"Something is settling in this house. Since Virginia Rose One talked to me the first time in my bed, I can feel and sense things in people around me. I think only about what I'm supposed to feel. I know what dad did with me is wrong, but that was him. I know that Jolene has done the same thing with other men, and she enjoyed it. I also know you'll regret it if you send Samantha

away. You will go to your grave deeply sorrowful, miserable, grieved beyond imagination, and alone.

“Right now, Virginia’s cut off from all of us for a time and a reason, and you sit here doing nothing. I’ve heard Virginia and Julie both discuss your thick head, and it’s true at times. You’re doing nothing, will not hasten Virginia’s return. If you send Samantha away, the cut-off will be permanent. She’ll never come back, and you’ll bear the weight of your ignorance until it breaks you. Follow the Virginia Roses’ guidance in your life, Uncle John. Don’t let it be stripped away from you over something stupid.”

She scrunched up her face and sat silent, waiting for him to speak.

“That was good, and you’re correct. I’m thick-headed sometimes. Does this have something to do with you? You’re too young to know some of these serious matters.”

“Yes, it does. All that’s happened to me has forced me to grow up too quickly, and I long for the day the healing arrives. I’ve overcome much, but I want to have children. I want to know that when they grow up, they’ll not be what George McNaulty was when he died.”

John pondered the statement.

“Do you think that the McNaulty’s and the evil spirits that feed them don’t have a clue of what’s happening in the world around us?” she asked.

He frowned.

“Don’t you think they’ll try to stop Virginia Rose any way they can? Or you for that matter? You and Virginia are intricately entwined and inseparable.”

He said nothing, but his mind worked.

“Go and get her suitcase, Uncle John. There will never be a question of your integrity in your relationship with Samantha or whether you’re right or wrong. Your personal reputation will remain spotless, so go. But please don’t screw up.”

Right then, Dozen and Jacob ran into the dining room and scrambled up on the stools at the breakfast nook.

Jacob shouted excitedly. “Yes! She’s a woman after my heart, Dad. She’s going to give us milk and cookies.”

Samantha sauntered into the kitchen, her hips provocatively swaying in tight shorts, and glanced at John. She smiled, went to the refrigerator, got the milk, and sat it on the table. She set three glasses down, winked, and blew him a kiss when he looked at her. She fulfilled her promise and let Jacob dunk a cookie and feed it to her.

“You’ve got a great son, John,” Samantha said. “You’ve got a wonderful daughter, John. Do you want to sacrifice them? Are you awake, John?”

Again, John saw her hair blowing in the breeze in a cemetery and felt he could not resist a liaison with her. “I don’t really know.”

Dozen and Jacob thanked Samantha and asked Paula to put them to bed.

“Where are your car keys, Samantha?” John asked when they were alone. “I’m not sure about anything; however, since you’ve come all the way from Finland, it would be rude not to give you room, board, and a full gas tank for the return trip.”

She delightedly tossed him the keys. “Well said, John. That is super good news to hear, really. You’ll never regret it.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

John sat in the basement den, reviewing cases. He made it through four pages before Samantha came to him. She winked and went to the bookshelves to study the selection of books.

"May I have permission to read the diary from Virginia Rose Number Four?"

"Yes. Read it. It's very interesting, some parts more than the others."

"Thanks." She blew him a kiss. "I won't distract you now. I'll wait upstairs in Virginia's downstairs office. When you're finished this lawyer stuff, come to me."

He nodded and returned to the folder on his desk. He concentrated on finishing one, but he could not do another. Finally, he completed his notes and set them aside.

"John, if you don't start doing some work, this Senior Partner Slot will go down the tubes faster than fiber through the intestines." He sighed and turned off the light.

He entered Virginia's office, and she read in the chair before the desk. She glanced up to greet him and then returned to the book. He approached her and kissed her left ear. She jerked and closed the book.

"I guess that means you're through with the depositions and all the lawyer stuff," she said, leaning her head back and making her neck available for him.

"You smell, so. . ."

"So, what, love? Think a moment."

He thought while she turned and kneeled in the chair. "It smells like jasmine, but different. It's a striking scent."

She pulled his face close and held it in her hands. "You're correct. It's Jasmine and Rose Petal. The scent is what to you?"

"Captivating. After I'm this close, I feel powerless to move. It makes you appear delicate, like you'll shatter if I touch you."

"Umm, that's an excellent description." She pulled her head back and breathed across his eyelids.

She softly laughed when he blinked and moved from the chair. She slipped a tape from her purse into the tape player. She pressed the button, and soft and easy jazz music filled the room. She held him close, and they danced until the tape ended.

"Samantha?" he whispered.

"Umm?"

"I'm not sure I can go through with this."

She smiled, shushed, and kissed him. Then, she led him to the bed, lay on top of him, took control, and after she really kissed him, all doubts disappeared from his mind.

*

The following day, John woke and glanced around the room, feeling strange in Virginia's office. Samantha lay by his side and draped over him on the single bed. She stirred when he woke, studied his eyes while they toured the room, and then met hers.

"Morning, lover. How are you today?"

"I feel fantastic. You're a delightful woman. You're exotic, erotic, and mind-boggling."

She blushed from adoration. "Wow! I'm all that?"

"All that and then some." He rubbed his hands over the skin on her back and shoulder. "How many perfumes do you wear at one time?"

"I use as many as necessary. Thank you. I'll fix breakfast while you get ready for the office. Don't worry about anything here; it's all well cared for. I have one thing to ask of you, honey. When strange things start happening tonight, don't be bitter. That's the incorrect response."

"Okay, sweets. Whatever that means. I won't." He kissed her passionately before he let her go.

*

He left for the office, and Samantha sat in the quiet living room with closed eyes. She waited a long time before she opened them when Mary Virginia Rose stood before her.

"Well done, Samantha! I'm proud of you. I don't know what to say." She shrugged and chuckled. "Men are strange, aren't they?"

"No way, Mary. They're enjoyable people. It's just some of them that are bad. We'd still be together if mine had possessed even one-quarter of John's purity. How many cycles are left until the end?"

"No more than two, so says Elizabeth."

"Good. Will this be dangerous for the baby?"

"Elizabeth says no. Virginia doesn't know yet. Anyway, I'm ready, are you?"

Samantha nodded. "Tonight, will be rough, but I'm prepared. In a way, I'm looking forward to it."

"Then, unless you require desperate help, I'll watch, and we'll see you next when the sword falls," Mary Virginia said.

*

Virginia Rose changed the wet rag on Susan's forehead again and left to stop a fight between two children. She quieted the arguing and yelling and sighed, enjoying the silence, if only for five minutes.

The third day of Susan's illness wore Virginia's nerves thin.

"Sorry," Susan apologized. "This happens every year. If I don't catch the flu virus at least twice, then something's wrong with me."

"Do you miss having your husband around when you're sick?" Virginia sat beside her and held a hand. "Was he any help at all?"

"No, he was worthless in nearly every aspect of the marriage, except sex, getting me pregnant, and making money to support us. I miss his money, but not him, not a bit."

"What did he do? Have you talked to anyone about it?"

Susan stared at the wall a moment.

"He dealt in cocaine, and he fenced stolen property. When he started using the drugs, he went off the deep end. The night he killed our son, he told me he was gaining strength and power and that soon, nothing on the earth could stop him. He said he would slaughter many women in the blink of an eye, quote, when the sword falls, end quote."

"He went to what he called the dark side and stayed that way. He told the court they could put him in jail, but he would be back to kill the rest of the children so his power would manifest and become irreversible. He was strange. It's been two years and seven months, and I've cried

out over Danny. I simply let everything go, and I don't know what to do if he gets released again. I keep praying that it never happens. I know there's nothing I can do to stop him. People tell me to get a gun."

She laughed and turned her head to cover her mouth when she coughed. "The people who say that weren't there that night. He twisted Danny's head off. I mean that, literally. The police arrived very soon afterward, and he fought them. It took them twelve bullets, mace, and five policemen to put him on the ground and get him under control. He didn't die. He lived to stand trial."

She sighed mournfully and started crying. "I live each day in fear. People don't think he's serious. They think it was just the effects of the cocaine he used. Bullshit, I say. They didn't see him or hear the things he said. No mere man could twist off a person's head. Do I look like the type of woman who could fight against someone like that? Maybe if I had a gun as big as they use on ships, just possibly. I feel helpless, and people say I'm safe because I've changed my name and moved here from Topeka, Kansas. He's a demon, and neither the children nor I will be secure until he's been slam-dunked into hell and chained there."

Virginia washed Susan's face and put the cold rag back on her forehead. She felt chilled even though the room was warm and meditated on what Susan told her.

"Susan, do you believe in God?"

"Yes, I do. I pray every day. I pray for the protection of my children and my life also. Will it work? I keep hoping that God will intervene if he ever gets out or away from prison. I hope so. It's not right."

"Well, I think that this time, He'll answer your prayers," Virginia said, more confident than she felt.

She left Susan and fixed a late dinner for the children, all three girls. She bathed them and felt overjoyed that they all went to sleep immediately. She returned to Susan and found her sleeping peacefully, though her breathing sounded raspy and irregular. She turned off the lights and went to the kitchen to wash the dishes. She looked out the window over the sink while the sink filled with water.

"I can't believe you expect me to do this, Rose Angels. That doesn't sound like a man at all."

"You're correct, almost, Virginia," said Ten. "Hang tough, Daughter. You're stronger than you think. All the suffering was not for pleasure and not for nothing. You will do just fine. You have a question?"

"I can't do this alone. I know you have faith in me, and I don't want to whine. But did you hear what she said? That's strong. That's not man, but a demon, Mamma."

Ten laughed. "When did we say that you were in it alone? We'll all be there to watch you and cheer you on."

Virginia Rose rolled her eyes. "Thanks, Mamma."

"No problem. The other answer is this. You are not broken in the literal sense. The problem is that you love very intensely, to the point of hurting yourself at times. The other Virginia Roses had to mature quickly, they were compressed into it from the sheer force of the curse. You are not; they had a short time to live, but you have many years left. You haven't learned to discipline the love to work miracles, but you are close to doing that. You'll be just fine. I'm proud of you, Virginia. See you later."

Virginia washed and dried the dishes and enjoyed the quiet house. Afterward, she lay down on the sofa and took off her braces.

“Remember to call Mark Daniels tomorrow about the aerobic lessons,” she murmured and slept soundly.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

John went to work the following day, and his actions amused Shirley. She noticed the change when he greeted her instead of the casual wave that put her in her place. The amusement grew to concern later in the morning when he asked her to go to lunch at Smithers on him. Suspicion increased as he talked during lunch and walked back to the office. She watched him become productive instead of spending hours on a simple case, and humming songs.

"John," she thought, "you hadn't mentioned Virginia Rose coming home, and we all know she walked out. Something must be wrong with you. I hope you're not messing up."

The day ended, and Shirley was shocked when he prepared to leave the office. A beautiful redhead came to her and asked for John Bennington. John came out then, moved to her immediately, embraced her, and kissed her ardently.

Samantha leaned back in his arms with a huge smile. "Umm, we're feeling romantic, huh?"

"Yes, we are. What brings you here now?"

"We'll leave your car in the lot, darling." She straightened his tie. "I want to take you on a small escapade if you don't mind."

"Whatever you wish, doll." He left and never said good-bye to the stunned secretary.

Samantha drove him to Kitts Hummock and parked near the last houses along the right lane. Then, she took him out to the dunes until no one could see them, sat on the sand, looked toward the ocean, and waited.

"Why are we here?" asked John.

"Patience," Samantha said. "You've been given much information about the Virginia Roses, but you still don't have it all. You soon will. The dreams of the roses Virginia Rose Four recorded in the diary were visions of the future. Still, you don't understand them and won't until you're released. You were given everything so you could teach your Virginia Rose when she becomes submissive."

She looked at him and shook her head. "Virginia Rose learned the difference, John, else she would have left you long ago. I know you think that she was not, but she was. People, over the ages, sometimes twist with great vulgarity the original meaning of the words we use today. Submissiveness will raise women's hackles all over America, and they don't know what the word truly means."

"It doesn't mean being controlled or surrendering the will?" asked John.

Samantha shook her head. "It was used that way once, and it angered women. But it wasn't intended that way. It means moldable, capable of being trained or permitting instructions to be given. The women of the Bible period were not mentioned much, but they were active in the home and community. They had slaves and servants in their homes. However, in matters of the church, they were to be instructed by the husbands. Women just don't realize the difference today."

John considered that. "She wasn't?"

"Not when you met her, but through you, she did learn, much more than any other Virginia Rose learned from their mothers. You were the spark to set her ablaze in many ways. With you and through you, she has gained much strength. She'll need it, and so will you. No other Virginia Rose was told about the rape of Virginia Rose One, the trial of Nathan Merriweather, or the

hanging. It was withheld for a reason, and you'll soon discover why. You may view your Virginia Rose as a martyr, but not in the literal sense."

He tensed on the word.

She took one of his hands.

"Within two cycles of the moon, the end will arrive. You are here today to have one of the dreams of Virginia Rose Four interpreted, not through roses, but through a medium you can understand. You remember the shock when you were asked for your keys in the judge's chamber at Wilmington?"

John swallowed hard and nodded. "I do."

"Then look to the ocean for strength, my love, unless you wish to relive it again for the last time. There will be no more pain inflicted. It will be a life-or-death struggle to the end."

Virginia Rose stood on the beach, wearing armor and chain mail clothing, like the knights in museums and castles. She strolled leisurely south along the coast with a sword on her left hip. Soon, several wild animals approached her, and she killed them quickly. She walked on, and she met a kind and gentle puppy. She rested herself on one knee and rubbed its head. It whimpered and licked her hands. She saw no one to claim it, so she picked it up, and it stopped whining. She walked with the sword in one hand and the puppy in the other.

She walked around one dune that protruded into the waves and met a giant dog, twenty times larger than the one she carried. The new dog looked lonely, and she lovingly patted its head. It snapped its jaws and bit off the puppy's head.

Virginia grew angry and raised her sword. There was a cry, and she looked at her feet. The puppy's mother was there crying, with three puppies huddled around her. The big dog looked on, disinterested. It attacked the three and bit their heads off with no compassion; with each one, it grew larger and more potent. Soon it was one hundred times larger than Virginia Rose. She brandished her sword and lunged at the dog. It backed up, laughed at her, lowered its head, and grasped her in its jaws. It flung her into the air like she was a little twig. She whirled like a pinwheel through the air and fell toward the beach.

She corrected herself and came down with her sword ready, aimed straight for the dog's head. With a bat from its paw, the dog knocked her away, and she went sailing. It caught up with her and hit her downward, driving her head-first into the sand with only her feet sticking up. It pulled her out with its mouth, laid her on the beach, and laughed.

She stood and grasped the sword with grim determination, no longer worried about preserving her own life, only taking the life of the dog, now turned dragon.

She gripped the sword firmly and ran directly into the dragon, slashing and tearing vast pieces of flesh. Still, it held her off and at last held her struggling in its mouth. It faced John and lowered its head until its nostrils were only inches from where he sat. Its fowl, hot breath gagged him.

He stared at the Virginia Rose, who still struggled and hit the dragon's head with her sword, drawing blood and tearing up the flesh of its face.

The dragon pulled back the flesh of its lips and grinned at John. It moved its forearms around, grabbed Virginia's head and legs, it bit down with its teeth and tore her in half. Blood flew, and John screamed. The dragon sat back on its tail and contentedly devoured Virginia Rose.

John screamed and held his stomach. Beside him, Samantha held him firmly in her arms. He turned his head to his right and dry heaved a few times. He trembled and breathed heavily after that until he calmed down.

When he recovered and could speak, he asked, "Why must they be so vivid and emotional? Isn't it enough to watch her die instead of feeling the blood?"

"It fulfills the purpose, John. From this moment onwards, you'll not be idle and moping, wondering where she is or why she left. You must find the Morgan connection. It's nearby, but you must find it. You must learn why Nathan was tried. You must find out why and how Virginia Rose Merriweather died. You must know why and how you must stop this dream sequence from becoming a reality. You must do it. If not, your next call will be to bury her."

When he looked at her, she saw the pain of the interpretation fading. His shoulders sagged, and he told her okay.

Samantha lay across his lap and looked up into his eyes. "Come on, love. Kiss me once, and let's go home. You need to do some work there."

They returned to the house and Samantha prepared a Finnish meal that brought many compliments and a marriage proposal from Jacob. Samantha enjoyed the whole affair and told Jacob she would marry him if he graduated first. He agreed.

Samantha called Paula aside when she prepared to take the children upstairs.

"I don't know how strong this conflict will be tonight, Paula. So, I ask you to remain in your room, regardless of what you feel is wrong or how desperately you're compelled to come and help. Furthermore, DO NOT let Dozen come downstairs, either. She's too vulnerable. We don't need to lose her."

Paula twisted her mouth to the right. "That sounds deathly serious. Okay. I promise."

Samantha chose another book and went to Virginia's office. John went to his den in the basement. The children grew gradually quiet after the noisy bathing, and Samantha listened to the third door close.

"Good night, Paula," she whispered and returned to reading her book.

Two hours and fifty-one minutes later, she heard John coming up the stairs from the basement. The external kitchen door opened simultaneously, and she listened to a woman talking to John. She closed the book and prepared herself.

"I'll give you fifteen minutes," she said and folded her hands together, praying for strength, guidance, and success. She looked at the digits on the clock and breathed steadily until fifteen minutes passed.

She stood, unbuttoned, and slipped off her bulky blouse and hung it on the back of Virginia's wheel chair. She locked her fingers and twisted her hands around, cracking the joints of her fingers. She walked silently through the hall and into the dining room. She stopped in the doorway and viewed the living room. She inhaled once, slowly, and deeply, and smiled. On the sofa, she could see the white skin on a set of bare hips. She fine-tuned her hearing.

John took a deep breath and exhaled forcefully. "Look, we shouldn't be doing this," he protested. His voice came across strained and uneasy.

"Shush," the woman said. "It's okay, really. I've waited for this for a long time."

"It's not right," John replied, and a kiss cut off the rest of the sentence.

"Do you know what it's like, watching you every day, and knowing you're out of reach? You're not now."

“I am out of reach.”

“If you were, you wouldn’t be here on the sofa with me. You’re the one who removed my skirt, not I.”

John sighed and moved his hands around to put them between his chest and her breasts.

“That doesn’t make it right,” he said.

Samantha approached the sofa and with a foot nudged the woman’s hips.

“Hey, babe. What’s happening here?”

The woman raised her head from John’s face and viewed the sudden intruder.

Samantha watched her eyes widen in the dimness.

“What’s up?” she repeated.

“Who the hell are you?” the woman asked. “John, who is she?”

“My name’s Samantha Wilson. You are Julie Winters. The introduction’s over. What are you doing? Will you answer me?”

Julie moved from John and sat on the sofa, reaching for her underwear and skirt.

Samantha stepped on them. “Answer the question, Julie!”

“I thought I might spend some private time with John. I didn’t know he had a hot piece on the side.”

Samantha did not respond with anger. “What’s wrong, Julie? Have you been sipping some black wine?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Move your foot from my clothes.”

Samantha remained firm. “Not until you give up the black wine. Give it up so you don’t screw up any further.”

Julie convulsed from head to foot and stared blankly at Samantha.

“You’re wrong, and you will get the fuck out! John belongs to me.” She swung her right hand at Samantha but instead of connecting, she found herself flying across the room. She landed hard on her back and rolled into the wall.

“This is for your benefit, Julie.” Samantha kept her voice kind and loving. “Give up the black wine, or it will choke you and keep you from the roses.”

Julie shivered and sat up. “What’s going on? What are you doing to me?”

Samantha took a few steps toward her and extended a hand with an incredible plea.

“Let it go, Julie. Take my hand and let it go. I’ll help you. Come on.”

Julie cringed away from her, and her face distorted with pain. “Why are you doing this? Get away from me. I want nothing to do with this.”

“Julie, give up the black wine. Hold my hand.”

John lay frozen on the sofa and felt the room-temperature drop until he thought he, and the women would suffer from frostbite.

Julie shook her head and backed away from Samantha. She pressed herself flat against the wall, clutching with her hands.

Samantha’s pleading voice continued talking to Julie. “It’s not too late, Julie. The roses can still help you. Come on, please. Touch my hand and let it go before it kills you. It will surely kill you now. You cannot fight it yourself.”

Julie’s face contorted and she moved one hand toward Julie. It snapped back, slamming into the wall hard enough to crack the plaster.

Upstairs, Paula jerked upright in bed. “Julie!” she screamed and jumped from the bed. She stopped at the door and fought to keep her hand from the knob.

She jerked herself back and sat on the floor, holding her knees in her hands.

“Come on, Julie,” Samantha repeated, standing firmly against the stupendous pressure to leave the room. “Touch my hand. I love you, and the Virginia Roses love you. Let the black wine go.”

A jagged bolt of lightning illuminated the living room, and a crash of thunder shook the house.

Julie’s hands crossed at the wrists, and she pressed them to her chest. She twisted her face, and one hand moved again toward Samantha. She shrieked and lunged at her.

“Help me!” she screamed and hit Samantha. “What’s it doing to me? It hurts! I can’t stand the pain!”

Samantha caught her. She deftly twisted her around and ran her arms under hers and locked her hands together behind her neck. Julie’s hands shot outward from her body. Black liquid, thick and oily dripped from her fingertips.

“What’s happening to me?” Julie screeched. “Stop this!”

Paula stood, turned the doorknob, and stopped herself again.

“Paula,” shouted Dozen. “What’s happening? Who’s hurting Julie? We must stop it. We must help her.”

“Go back to bed,” yelled Paula. “Don’t leave your bed. She’s not in trouble.”

“She is. I heard her. She’s in a lot of pain!”

Paula jerked the door open just in time to grab Dozen before she reached the top of the stairs. She dragged the kicking, screaming girl into her room. She pinned her to the floor with her body.

“She’s not in trouble, Dozen!” Paula fought the urge to go with her.

“Okay,” Dozen answered. “I’ll get you for this if Julie dies.”

Julie kicked with her legs and shoved Samantha backward until she lost her balance. Samantha held her tightly in her arms. Then, using only her legs, she righted herself to her knees and held the gradually softening woman.

“It’s killing me! It’s tearing out my insides. NO!”

She screamed once more, and the last drops of liquid formed two spheres the size of volley balls. Julie’s legs kicked straight out, and Samantha nearly fell forward. The black shiny spheres shot through the ceiling, and the room temperature returned to normal instantly.

Julie sagged limp and Samantha gently unlocked her hands and lay her down on her back. She picked up her skirt and covered her.

She turned to John. “Are you okay?”

He rubbed his arms and stared at Julie. “Yes, I am. What was that?”

“Black Wine a very powerful demonic substance. I’m glad you resisted. You would have joined her, and Virginia Rose would have been lost to you forever. That is some very seductive stuff. Again, I’m glad you fought it.”

“It wasn’t her fault,” he declared, gazing at Julie’s limp form.

“You’re right about that. That’s the correct response.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Virginia arose, relieved that Susan's fever disappeared in the night. She checked on her and found her dressed and sitting on the edge of the bed.

She towed her hair as she talked. "Hey, Virginia. Thanks. You're a super person for moving in like this and helping me. I've done it by myself in the past and it just drags on for weeks. Thanks, bunches."

Virginia nodded. "You can thank me bunches when I send my bill. I'm a capitalist and believe in economic recovery."

"You got it, girlfriend. I might collapse again for a heavy nap later, but by tomorrow, I'll be kicking. How about you?"

"So will I, but I might need some help on the kicking part."

"How did that happen?"

"Car accident. A bus ran a red light and wiped me out, but I was worse than this. I was in bed for a long time, totally paralyzed. Then I spent some time in a wheelchair. Now I'm here. I don't know if I'll improve further, but I'll take it as it comes."

"Why aren't you married?"

Virginia shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe no one ever thought of marrying a quadriplegic. I lost two years of my life over that. Anyway, since I move all over the country to find people to put into my cartoons and columns, being single makes it easier."

Susan nodded and brushed out her still damp hair. "You want to go out?"

"I think I will. First, I want to find an aerobics instructor named Mark Daniels. I must arrange some aerobic dancing or something for my little lambs here." She patted her legs.

"That's a good idea. But, you know, I admire your courage and resolve. I'm glad you ran into me. Maybe some of the good in you will rub off on me. You're an angel."

Virginia laughed and flashed a sincere smile. "I'm not an angel, girlfriend. Don't start that rumor, please. I'll never get rid of the reporters if you do."

"I won't do that to you. Mark Daniels' office and studio is on West Saddle Street. It's right past the empty Murphy's store. You'll like him. He's young and handsome. The single women take his classes, whether they need it or not, to watch him dance. The married women take the classes to dream of the one that got away."

"Maybe he'll be the one who plucks this wilting rose," Virginia sighed. "I hope he kisses better than the man in my dreams."

"Get on out of here and relax a little." Susan laughed and shooed her toward the door. "Hurry, before the hurricanes wake up and surround you."

Virginia found a parking place and walked back to the studio. She paused when she approached the giant glass panel and looked at herself in the mirrors inside. She fluffed up her hair and reminded herself to find a beauty parlor for a perm and maybe a manicure also. She inspected her hands.

"Definitely do my nails. I haven't done that for years."

A two-tone chime sounded when she moved through the door. When the door shut, it closed off the street noise and odors. The interior replaced them with a flowery scent and soft upbeat music. She gazed at the tastefully decorated walls and floors, which looked full but very organized and uncluttered.

"Be right with you," called a baritone voice from a back room.

"No problem. I'll wait." She sat in an overstuffed chair and sank back farther than she thought she would. She struggled and still had not got up when Mark Daniels entered the lobby.

He laughed at her struggles. "Hello, Miss. I see you've chosen the chair that occasionally eats people. Not a wise choice when it's hungry."

Virginia looked up at him and ceased struggling. "Whoa, Self," she thought. "This is more than handsome; this is a daydream special."

"Better than Fish Lips," Self-offered.

Mark caught her hands and pulled her quickly from the chair. He stood her on her feet and inspected her. "We have a lovely woman here, Self," he thought. "This could be the start of good things in Cumberland. This is a misplaced Princess who makes the most gorgeous of women here look like farmers."

"Look at her hands," Self told him.

He noted the white marks left from the rings.

"How may I help you, Miss?"

"You can call me Virginia Rose. I need to register for some aerobics classes. Also, I need some therapy for my legs since I'm not in Chicago where I normally get it."

He thought a moment and considered what he could do. "Virginia, I don't want to sound unkind, but I don't think I can help you there. I don't think you could keep up with my classes."

She detected a sadness when he talked. "Mark, you don't sound unkind; you sound sad. I didn't ask for the accident which caused this, but I've made great progress from total paralysis to walking with braces. I am grateful to each person that helped me until I could help myself. Joining your classes wasn't my intent. I know I can't do that right now. What I want and need is a private class. Do you think you could handle that?"

Mark admired her determination and drive, liked her beauty, and loved her body. He sighed mentally.

"Okay. I think that a specialized aerobics class would be good for you. It would exercise muscles that walking doesn't."

"Also provide some strength and endurance?"

"Exactly. Will you please come into my humble office and fill out my registration form? Then I'll work up a good exercise routine for the music and we'll start to work. Do you live close?"

She nodded and moved in the direction of his hands. "I'm staying with a friend while I'm here."

"What are you doing here?" he asked and sat behind a small table that served as desk. He handed her the form on a clipboard.

"I go all over the place to find people who have had serious problems in relationships, with drugs, the courts, companies, or governments. Then I turn them into a good form of commentary. I either put them into The Rose Connection, my newspaper column, or I turn them into cartoons and put them into Jolene's Corner."

Mark jerked up straight in his chair. "You draw Jolene's Corner?" He disbelieved what he heard.

She grinned at his shock and understood he did not believe her. "Yes. I'll do one about your studio someday. I'll have this chair that eats the dancers when they get unruly in class."

Mark laughed and sat back. "I never thought I'd meet you in my studio. Why did you start that?"

“Did you read the first one?”

“Yes, I did. I’ve read them all. I thought that some of the content was overstated but it was good that someone did it. You made the guy sick. I’m glad that it’s make believe.”

“It was a real family, Mark. His son really killed him.”

“Are you married?” he asked, changing the subject.

She stopped writing and smiled. “I don’t think so. After the bus hit me broadside, I woke up knowing nothing at all. The jerk wiped out more than my body. I had a driver’s license with my picture on it and the name Virginia Rose Bennington. I remember Jolene and that’s about all. It’s like a piece of my memory was rudely cut out. So, I don’t think so. Why?”

He studied her as she filled out the form. “Because I think I’d like to know you better. You look out of place and you’re very attractive. I’d like to take you to dinner some evening. May I?”

“You may. I’d like that.”

He took the form from her and chuckled at the small cartoon of him dancing with a rose. “Okay. We’ll include dancing also.”

Sabob *

John left the basement of the courthouse confused and angry. He drove north to Smyrna, parked his car, and spent some time sitting near Lake Como, staring at the water, and waiting for the sun to go down. He contemplated the incredible wrongness of Nathan’s trial transcript. He failed to comprehend how any judge or jury, anywhere in the world, could arrive at a guilty verdict from the overwhelming evidence presented on his behalf. He left when the sky grew dark and visited Ralph Watson.

“That’s what I discovered, Ralph. When Virginia Rose died, Nathan Merriweather was on a ship in the Caribbean Islands. There was no possible way that he could have killed her. Hell, he could not have killed even half the women they said he did. It’s beyond me. I felt like my mind just exploded.”

“Remember the dream of the judge’s murder? The judge said she died of a disease. Is it possible that he gave her the disease?”

John shrugged. “The man who raped Virginia Rose had a disease and it sounds like it was probably syphilis. That disease would take many years to kill her if it did. There was no cure then, but she should have lived longer than the few days she did.”

“A few days? You didn’t mention that before.”

“I never made the connection before now. However, Virginia’s death and trial date were eight weeks apart. Nathan was on his way home. Virginia was dead when he arrived. How did the judge arrange a hanging out of that injustice? There must still be a missing piece.”

“How about Dr. Morgan? Maybe there’s something with him that will put it all together,” suggested Ralph.

“I’m still tracking him down. There are vast gaps in his descendants. It’s only a matter of time.”

“Who’s the redhead that lit your fire?”

John smiled and rolled his eyes with a contented sigh. “Samantha. She’s a marvel.”

“I’ll bet she is. She motivated you in many ways.”

“Speaking of which, I must go now. She’s waiting for me. I don’t want to disappoint her when she wants to dance.”

Ralph laughed at the change in his friend. "Yeah, right. You'd better be careful. Virginia might come home anytime and then you'll really lose her."

John stood and briskly rubbed his hands. "I'll risk it. See you day after tomorrow."

Samantha waited for him, but she did not want to dance when he came home.

"Do you know a Richard Johns?" she asked when he finished kissing her.

"Yes, vaguely. He's Sarah Johns' husband. She's the one who was drugged in Berkwood West. Virginia saved her, but she's still out of touch with reality."

"Well, he called while you were out and he wants to see you, soon."

"Me? That's odd. I barely know him."

He greeted the rest of his family and then went to Virginia's office. He paused to inhale the fragrance of Samantha's perfumes, sighed, sat at her desk, and opened her card file to Sarah Johns.

"Hello, John," Richard said. "I heard that Virginia Rose left?"

"Yes. She's been gone for a while. I keep hoping that she'll come back. I don't know. Anyway, what can I do for you?"

"I'd like you to come over for a visit tomorrow night if you will. Sarah is sometimes, uh, active. I think that's what I want to say. She can't talk except a few words, watches a lot of television, and smiles forever. She has little control over her hands, but she spent a long time this evening writing your name on the dresser mirror with her lipstick. I think she wants to see you."

"Strange. Okay. What time?"

"Anytime you want. I'll be home at five-thirty."

"I'll be there tomorrow at seven o'clock."

He hung up the phone and remembered the scene where she cringed away from Richard at the hospital and cried when they took her away from Virginia Rose.

*

John arrived at seven as planned and followed Richard to the living room.

"Hello, Sarah," John said. "How are you?"

Sarah turned her head from the television and stood from her chair.

She shuffled across the floor to where he stood. She worked her mouth and finally said, "Hi," very faintly. She touched his face, held out her right hand and waited for John to take it. When he did, she led him upstairs to the master bedroom.

She sat on the floor by the bed, scooted herself close to it, and used both hands to put her left leg under the edge of the bed and leaned back on her hands. She moved her leg until a small aluminum box slid from under the foot of the bed. She scooted to where it stopped and turned to John, motioning with her jerky hands.

John sat beside her and unsnapped and opened the box.

"What's in here, Richard? Do you know?"

"Papers about the house, insurance, my will, things like that. This is strange."

Sarah reached inside and pushed some of the envelopes around. She kept working until she uncovered one of the papers and moved away. Then, she hung her head and started crying.

"She's not cried before," Richard said. "What did she do?"

"She uncovered her birth certificate." John picked it up. "Sarah Ann Morgan."

He did a double take, reached out and raised Sarah's chin. "Holy Smoke! You were born Sarah Ann Morgan? Is that what you want me to know?"

Her head twitched up and down. Her lips moved and she said, "Times. Hurts." She cried some more.

"Do you know what she's doing?" Richard asked. "This is freaking me out."

"Yes, I think I do. I've been tracing the history of Virginia Roses and McNaulty's. Then somewhere along the line, I got some information on the Morgan family. There was a Morgan, a veterinarian, involved with the death of the first Virginia Rose. Exactly how I don't know. Some parts of the Morgan family tree are missing."

"How do you do that?" asked Richard. He sat down and took Sarah in his arms.

She stopped crying, laid her head against his chest, and watched John.

"I do a lot with diaries and newspapers. Talking with family members where I can. Getting information out of family Bibles and museums. Anything and anywhere."

Sarah's hands moved again.

John looked at her. "Bible," he said and waited. "Diary."

She nodded. She leaned her head back and looked at Richard. "Please," she forced out.

"Yes," Richard said. "She does have some diaries in the attic, along with some records of the veterinarian you mentioned. They're old, worn out, and brittle, but you might still be able to read them."

He released Sarah and left the room. He returned shortly with a large box and placed it on the floor.

Sarah moved John's hands to the box, a pleading look on her face.

"Okay, Sarah. I'll read them. I hope there is something here that will help. I hope it helps you too."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The meal elated Susan. “You cook very well, Virginia. That was delicious. Even the hurricanes ate it.”

Virginia made no reply, but she blushed.

“I hear your classes start tomorrow?” Susan filled her cup with coffee. She offered the same for Virginia and sat back down.

“Yes. Mark’s a good man. He’s worked up routines with slow music or no music at all.”

“If there’s no music, you two will make your own,” Susan smiled impishly.

Virginia denied it.

“Hey, you can’t hide what you feel when you talk about him, and you talk about him a lot.”

“Do not,” Virginia blushed. “Well, maybe a little.”

“You put him in the cartoons also.”

“Are you going to give me a pregnancy test after the first class?”

Susan chuckled and applauded. “I hadn’t thought of that. That might not be a bad idea.”

“You’re terrible.”

“You have to be terrible to live like I have.”

Virginia felt Susan’s tension building to the snapping point again.

“Talk Susan. I’m a good listener.”

“I don’t know where to start. There’s been so much.”

“You could start with the nightmares?”

Susan nodded and took a sip of coffee. “Yes, the nightmares. Do I say anything?”

“Sometimes the word Danny. Mostly you just mumble and groan, lots.”

“Yes, I have the nightmares of watching Danny die. It starts at the point where he hits him the first time. Danny asked to leave the table and he didn’t say something, like sir, I think. Brian hit him in the face with his fist and blood squirted from his nose. He fell and tried to sit up when Brian stood and kicked him. It went too fast after that, until he sat on Danny’s back. That’s when he said something like, ‘The roses are making me do this.’ Then he killed him.”

Virginia started to sip her coffee and paused. “Why didn’t I think of that before? What do roses have to do with killing your son?”

Susan’s hands started to tremble as she stared across the table to Virginia. “You’re a rose. You’re not safe here! Please go and swiftly!”

Virginia sat stoically and pitied the frantic face. “You didn’t remember it because I wasn’t around for the message. Now I am. Now it’s delivered.”

“No, you’ve got to go, Virginia! He’ll kill you.”

“Maybe and maybe not. That remains to be seen. However, I won’t go. I’m here, and I’ll be here for the end.”

Susan sat the cup down and shivered. She closed her eyes a moment, feeling lost, and then opened them.

“Where was I?” she asked.

“The nightmares.”

“Yes, the nightmares. They didn’t start for a long time. Then, just last month, they started coming more frequently. What am I going to do when he gets out and comes after me?”

“Resist him, fight him and kill him, if necessary,” Virginia said. “If you don’t the courts never will.”

Susan's laugh was bitter and sarcastic. "You make it sound easy. Doing it won't be accomplished with the same ease."

"You'll have more than enough help this time. I promise you that."

"I hope you're right. Where was I?"

"Talking about no longer hurting," Virginia said.

"Yes. Right. I was thinking that when you're around me, I don't hurt half as much as I have in the past. You make me feel strong. Yes, strong and pain free. You're better than aspirin."

"You'll make it, my friend. You'll have the love of this Virginia Rose to watch over you. You'll maintain that feeling for a long time after I leave you."

*

Richard, Ralph, John, and Jeff sat in Ralph's basement among the stacks of papers and empty soda cans. Each one read through the diaries and notebooks left by Dr. Morgan in 1784.

"Here we go," said John. "This is after her rape and before her death:

I left the room for only a few moments. Lucienne called me because the buzzards flew closer to the buckboard. I didn't concentrate too much on the dead woman, due to my concern for the living one. I moved the buckboard into the barn and closed the door. I met Lucienne on the path to my office and I took the bowl of soup from her. I held it in one hand and opened the door. The woman knelt beside the sheep.

"Leave her alone, Miss," I told her. "She's got anthrax and it's been known to kill humans."

"I know," she said, the first words she spoke since I picked her up. I moved closer and I saw what she did. Her finger still dripped with blood when she raised it and placed it into her mouth.

I cried for her to stop and dropped the soup to reach her, but I was too late. She repeated it twice before I could get her away.

"Are you crazy? You'll die, Miss. You shouldn't do that."

"I'm Virginia Rose Merriweather," she said and sat on a stool. "I've been raped by a man with an incurable sexual disease. As a result, I can no longer function as a wife. I cannot sleep with Nathan. I can bear no children. My life is ruined, and there is no help. Only death can offer that. I will not tolerate women staring at me when the word of what happened is loosed in the community. I will die of a dreadful disease, and Nathan will continue to live and care for our children. He must not learn of what happened at the hands of Judge McNaulty and his band of heathens. He must think that I died of a disease, not from the pain of what I truly suffered."

I looked at her, dumbfounded. "Do you realize what will happen to you now?"

I could scarcely believe her calm, steady voice.

"I know, and I will face it. You may take me somewhere else to die if you wish. I don't want to burden you."

I regarded her for a long time until I decided. "I'll do what I can to ease the pain. I will provide opium for that. Really, that's all I can do. I will make the death certificate for you myself. I'm sorry that this thing happened. You should have done something to stop him instead of killing yourself. However, it is done, and I'll keep your secret."

She smiled faintly and thanked me. "I hope you remain untouched in this matter, Dr. Morgan."

“Hmm,” Ralph mused. “Yes, that makes sense. Judge McNaulty thought that she was dead when they dumped her. However, she wasn’t, and she killed herself with anthrax, to save her reputation and name. That’s where the confusion came into him before he died. He knew it and wondered how Matthew could make the connection and blame him for murder. So, he effectively killed her, although she provided the virus to do it.”

“So, with the death certificate filed, and no one around to know otherwise, how did Matthew make the connection?” asked Richard.

John thought a moment. “Wait a darned minute! When he was in the cell on the day of the hanging, he told Virginia Rose Two that Virginia’s name had been tarnished by heathens. He knew it then, before he died, and he told Matthew. But how would Nathan know to question the death certificate? The curse at the trial was given and it incited a riot. He told Virginia Two that through her the curse would be stopped. Keep reading. There’s got to be another piece here somewhere.”

*

Virginia Rose finished her fourth class with Mark and sat on the floor, sweating and exhausted. She gratefully accepted the offered towel. “I haven’t worked this hard for a long time.”

“It’s good for you,” Mark said.

They sat together for a time.

She yawned and patted her mouth. “I’m really exhausted, Mark. I don’t think I can make it home right now. I need a nap.”

He laughed, stood, and offered her a hand. She took it but he released it when he realized that she could not move her legs to stand.

“I think maybe you overworked yourself.” He worried about her. “Do you still have feelings in them?”

“Oh, yes, I feel them, but they’re just too stiff to move right now.”

Mark carried her to a smaller room in the back with a daybed, laid her down and removed her braces. He massaged her legs with liniment, and she groaned as the tight muscles relaxed. Before he finished, she was asleep.

She woke hours later with his face close to hers and experienced a moment of panic before she remembered why she was lying there. She studied his face while he slept and felt around with her hands. Finally, she sighed, relieved to find herself still dressed.

While she moved her hands, he woke and watched her curiously. “What are you doing?”

“Checking. I felt lost for a moment.”

“You thought I would take advantage of you? I’m hurt. Truly hurt.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Sometimes I worry about that. The problem is that there’s just no feeling there, yet. I seldom date for that reason. I remember how it felt, but that’s all I can do, remember. I’m sorry. I don’t want to make you feel bad.”

He laughed spontaneously. “If I wanted that, I would’ve discussed it first. I can handle a lot of intimacy without sex. I wouldn’t take advantage of you, even if you had no problems with your legs. I’d wait until you made the first move, the first time. After that, I wouldn’t wait. I’d be all over you like a ten-peckered Billy goat in an ewe brothel.”

Virginia giggled until she cried. When she regained control, she kissed him.

“You make me feel really great, sweets.” She fought down another attack of giggling. “I haven’t felt so good or laughed so much for a long time. You’re doing more to me than working on my legs. Maybe you will be the one to bring the rest of me back to life. Thanks for being here to find me.”

He pulled her close and kissed her intently. Then, he moved his head back and looked at her fluttering eyelids.

“Virginia, you have a way of making me feel good also. I love you, My Lady. Maybe someday, after I grow six more peckers, I’ll make you, my wife. Would you like that?”

She covered her mouth and made a strange sound, suppressing the giggles again. “You’re bad, and yes, I think I might like that very much. When you’re ready for me, I’ll be your wife. Enough for now though. You’ll kill me with the giggles.”

“If there’s anything I can do for you, my love, just let me know,” he told her. He kissed her again and lay back on the bed.

“I want you to hold me in your arms until morning,” she said, snuggling close to him.

“Good. I had already decided not to let you go right now.”

*

“Here we go,” said Richard. “I think this passage will put it together:”

I thought that everything was resolved with Virginia Rose. Her dying here was most stressful for me and Lucienne. Lucienne did not know what had happened to her. I told her that maybe she was ill before I picked her up.

Virginia smoked a lot of opium and rambled at times about the power and love of Virginia Roses. I did what I could, which was hold her hand, listen, put cold compresses on her forehead when the fever ravaged her body. I felt at times that she would take me with her. Then it was finished. The other woman I had already delivered to the cemetery in Smyrna. I did the same for Virginia Rose.

Then Nathan came home from the sea. He was overwhelmed with grief when he learned about his Virginia Rose. The news was delivered already for there was a real fear and worry over an anthrax plague. He accepted it as fate for a time. Then he overheard one of the men who witnessed Virginia’s rape comment on her body and a birth mark. Nathan beat him half to death and then he came to me.

Lucienne tried to intervene out of fear for my life, and Nathan shoved her out of the way. She fainted, and then he beat me. He kept demanding the truth. When I feared for my life, I told him what had happened. He still raged on, but he let me go. He asked me some questions about the disease that George had. I told him it had been around for centuries and could not be cured. He said that McNaulty would pay for what he did.

I told him that he should not approach McNaulty about the matter. I advised him to leave the state and let the issues be resolved by the vigilante groups that still were active. He said he would consider it. The next day, McNaulty and his constables arrested Nathan and charged him with raping and killing his Virginia Rose and many other women. McNaulty arranged it with money paid in advance for cooperation on the stories he created. He railroaded Nathan to the scaffold, hanged an innocent man, and covered his own crimes and sins.

Lucienne never recovered from her fright that day. She died a week later, and I buried her where we purchased the grave site. She rests now in Drawyer Cemetery in Odessa. I was left

with three daughters and no wife. However, I chose not to put the date of her death on the tombstone. I've heard that if you don't, their spirit will remain on earth and force itself to be justified before it rests. Maybe someday, when her death has been vindicated, it will be done by some of my descendants or someone else.

Right now, it is still not over. Matthew approached me and asked some of the same questions as his father. I answered freely that time. After that, he left and said he would handle the judge.

When Judge McNaulty was killed by the vigilantes, the rapes and murders stopped. Only then did the people consider the injustice of Nathan being hanged, but it was too late for him.

"Well, that will just about do it for that period," Ralph concluded. "This is intriguing. I almost feel like a detective."

"What else is left?" asked Richard. Since he joined with John and Ralph, he grew excited about the possibility of Sarah being restored. He was ready to hope upon anything.

"All that really remains is finding the last McNaulty," said John.

"We finally made the connection that Rebecca Edison was an offspring of an affair of a McNaulty male," Ralph added, "and Dozen said there were two left. So, we draw a blank, again."

"What about Marlene McNaulty?" asked Jeff. "Maybe she knows something."

"That would be nice, but she hasn't spoken since she was arrested and sent to prison. She listens to you, and says nothing," explained Ralph. "I don't know if she ever will."

Outside Ralph's home, Virginia Rose One and Ten stood and listened to the men in the basement.

"Things are going well now with Samantha on the scene," One said. "The lines should start to move again very soon, and the second cycle is near. Only one more piece of information for John to find. Do you want to handle that one, Ten?"

She danced a merry jig and clapped. "Yes! I will unseal Marlene when Ralph and John visit her the next time."

"That will do it," One said. "They are so talkative when that happens. Like they feel the tongue will be tied again."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Virginia woke and left Mark while he was still sleeping. She drove to Susan's house and went inside.

Susan sat on the sofa in the still quiet house, enjoying a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Virginia."

"Hi. I thought you might still be asleep."

"Good thought, but I woke up early today. You spend the night with Mark?"

Virginia blushed immediately. "Yes, I did, but nothing happened. Really."

"I didn't say or imply anything. I just asked."

Virginia sighed. "I know, but you thought it. But, gosh. Why are you doing this? Why am I blushing when I did nothing wrong?"

Susan grinned broadly. "Maybe because you thought of it. Maybe because you came very close to giving in."

"As a matter of fact, I did." Virginia sat beside her, rubbed her shoulders with one hand and Susan grew quiet.

"What's wrong? You have another nightmare?"

Susan nodded. "I like you, Virginia. I like you a lot."

"Tell me the nightmare."

"Brian stood at the foot of my bed. He stuck a knife in my left foot, and it came out through the top. I screamed and he held my leg tight, so I couldn't move it and take the knife out to stop the pain. He twisted the knife blade around. When I stopped screaming again, he pulled it out and let my foot just bleed while he watched it. He looked at me eventually. 'Tell the Rose Bitch that when I get here, I'll rip heart out, through her ass.' Then he left."

Virginia's face twisted in sorrow, and she hugged Susan closely.

"What are you doing, Virginia? I like you. I love you a lot, but I'm worried about you. This didn't start happening until I met you. What are you doing to me? Why is this happening?"

Virginia turned Susan's face around and held it in her hands. "Let the pain go, Susan," she whispered. "Let it go. You're caught in the middle for the moment. Pour the pain into me. You'll be okay, soon. You'll be okay forever. Give the pain a rest."

Susan's face relaxed and she leaned against Virginia's shoulder. She stopped crying and blinked. "What was I saying?" she asked.

"You were saying that you would like to live here and experience true freedom."

"Oh, yes. Why do I keep forgetting what I'm saying? Do you think its senility setting in early?"

"I don't think so. I think it's just the stress of the flu that's causing it. It won't last, trust me."

Susan nodded. "I really do love it here. The economy is so reasonable, and the education system is good for the children. I like the mountains and I do feel free here. Maybe someday it will be complete."

"Most definitely," Virginia confirmed.

*

Ralph took John along and they visited Marlene McNaulty. They waited in the visiting room until she arrived. She glanced silently at Ralph and John as she sat with them.

“Marlene,” Ralph said. “This is John Bennington. He’s a good friend of mine and he’s helping me with the book I’m working on about the McNaulty family.”

She regarded John and said nothing.

“Will you break your silence and talk to us about this?” Ralph asked.

“John’s wife, Virginia Rose, is gone. She left, and we feel certain that there is another male McNaulty alive. We also feel that he will try to kill Virginia Rose. We would be grateful if you can help us, even in a small way.”

Marlene turned her head and looked at the other people in the room. When she faced the men again, she seemed incredibly pained.

“There is another one. And if I had my way, he wouldn’t be alive today.” She took a deep and ragged breath.

“Damn the man! About five years into my marriage to Walter, he had an affair. The woman was barely twenty-five and into witchcraft and voodoo, conducting séances and all that. If it was evil, she sopped it up. She had a very seductive personality and body to match, but she was pure evil to me. That’s all I know. She frightened me half insane when she was in my presence.

“We’d tried to have a child, and the doctors said it wasn’t possible for me. Well, the witch, Saratha, convinced him that she could make me fertile, and the price was his body for her use. So, he took her up on the offer.

“I don’t know what they did to me, Ralph. I don’t know and am often afraid to think about it. I do remember this. I was naked on a bed, and she touched my body. I couldn’t stop her, and I didn’t want to. When she finally stopped and moved aside, I begged her not to leave me. Walter took over when she quit. She rubbed my breasts, held my hands, and kissed me while he made love to me. Never in my life have I ever experienced such intense pleasure. During that time, I felt, no, I knew that I’d be pregnant. I felt like I delivered him on the spot, like an instant baby.

“I was pregnant, no doubt. The child was beautiful, and I forgot how he was conceived. But he was evil, like Saratha. We once visited a friend of mine in Indiana. While there, he buried some of their chickens up to their necks. Then he ran over them with one of those push lawnmowers, the reel type. He played with the blood they left. He was in constant trouble in school. I don’t know how many times we had to visit the principal. Then he left. He just told me he was going to hell and prepare a room for me. He blamed me for his nature, but it wasn’t mine. Whatever Walter and Saratha did, it was all her. She was responsible for the evil, not me.

“You’re looking for Brian McNaulty, Saratha’s son. The last I heard, he was in Topeka, Kansas. He was married and had four children.”

John’s mouth twitched, and he felt something was wrong with the confession.

“If you had him, why is there not a birth certificate? We’ve done a lot of research and did not find one,” he asked.

Marlene sighed. “There never was one. I don’t know how he gets around needing one, but he does. He was born in Saratha’s bed, in her house, by her hands. There never was a birth certificate filed.”

“You had him in Saratha’s bed?”

Marlene nodded. “Yes, Saratha helped in the delivery. After that, she did something to me. I remember screaming something fierce and Walter holding me down on her bed. After that, I never felt anything sexual again. I never minded. I had Brian, and his problems did not start until much later. I slept in a spare bedroom with Brian. Walter and Saratha slept in my bed. They had a lot of fun there, and I didn’t care. I had what I wanted. Saratha left after a few years, and then

Walter turned to other women. Again, I didn't mind. It's difficult to put into words, but even the memory of sex was totally removed from my body, so I didn't care what he did.

"I know this sounds strange, but I didn't remember anything until a week before I killed Walter. On that one night, I had a dream of roses. The roses talked to me. They said they had to break the seal on me so I could know what evil was done and help to correct it. They said I'd suffer for a while but wouldn't last long. Then the nightmares hit with no mercy. Everything that Saratha and Walter did came back vividly. I relived all the terror and pain. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand it."

She paused and started sobbing. "In the end, I couldn't tolerate the indignant and disgusting things that Saratha and Walter did to my body and mind. They destroyed my life for their own perverse sexual pleasure. I didn't want to drag it through the press, so I killed him and pled guilty so it wouldn't go to trial. I might be in a mental institution instead of here if it had. I'm glad I killed Walter, but I can do nothing about Saratha's son. That makes me feel sad and helpless. I'd kill him too if I could."

"What name does he use?" asked Ralph.

"Brian Sarath," she said, getting the tears under control. "If not that, then Brian Sarath Adams, or sometimes George McNaulty."

John caught her hands. "Marlene, many people have suffered at the hands of the McNaultys. Don't associate yourself with their evil. You weren't a willing participant. I hope you don't suffer much longer."

"Thanks, John," she said. "I hope you find your Virginia Rose before he does. But, unfortunately, he's not fully human, so he's not going to be easy to stop or kill."

*

Virginia continued her exercises and, as a result, could walk very short distances without the braces. However, she had her hands full with Susan and her dreams. Virginia waited one night until Susan fell asleep, and instead of going to the spare bedroom, she went to the backyard. She sat at the picnic table and looked at the sky.

"God, this is getting to me. I know I'm here for a reason, but not knowing why is becoming a burden. Susan is suffering, and I know I'm helping her. I'm concerned about what will happen to her when I leave. She can't cope with three children like this. It's beginning to wear me out, just taking the pain away from her. Please give me more strength so I can bear it. Also, please help me find a way to help her become stable and permit me to leave when I must. Thank you for putting up with me. I'll try to be more obedient. Amen."

She sat and watched the stars begin to twinkle.

"Well said, Virginia," said Virginia Ten when Virginia prepared to leave.

"Mamma, what's going on with Susan? I think that Brian's coming soon, am I right?"

"Yes, Daughter," she said. "He'll be released soon in some way. The Lines of Demarcation are moving."

"Will I have the strength to face him?"

"You will."

"I'm scared, Mamma. I'm terrified."

"There's nothing wrong with that. The important thing is that you are doing what is right."

"What about Susan? The woman's wearing me out."

“She will be healed when the time is right. When you were born, you crawled, stood, took some steps, and walked. Only after all the right stages did you finally run. Patience, Daughter.”

“What about Mark?” Virginia asked, picturing him dancing in her mind.

“Mark is good for you. That’s why he’s in your life. He gives you the strength to handle Susan.”

“Would he make me a good husband? He’s very kind and sincere. I love him, Mamma.”

“He would make an excellent husband, Virginia,” Ten said.

“Will I, no, can I marry him?”

“If you wish, Daughter. Keep alert and be prepared. Farewell.”

*

The desk sergeant moved some things aside on the desk and pressed a call button. He picked up a notebook and began to flip through it. Four officers entered the lobby and stood out of the way on each side of John.

Another man came into the room behind the dispatcher.

“May I help you?” he asked John.

“I’m John Bennington. I was curious if there were any capiases or warrants on Brian Sarath McNaulty. I was hoping that I might find a social security number or address to see if I could pick up a trail of the man. He’s a bad one, and I need to find him.”

“Who are you?” he asked, nodding to the men in the lobby.

“A lawyer from Dover, Delaware.”

The four officers approached John from behind.

“Sir, please keep your hands visible and place them behind your head,” instructed one.

“Whatever,” John replied. “You have a nice way of greeting visitors here in Topeka.” He did as they requested.

They frisked him and told the man inside that he was clean. They escorted him to an interrogation room and left him alone momentarily.

“Run a rap sheet on him,” Detective Jenkins instructed, watching John sitting in the room.

The computer check returned nothing on a John Bennington. He nodded and went inside, where John waited.

“Hello, Mr. Bennington. I’m Detective Jenkins.”

“Hi. I wish to credit you for your hospitality and treatment. My rap sheet is clean, right?”

“What do you want with Brian Saratha, Mr. Bennington?”

“When I find him, I want to follow him. I was asking for information to get a lead and then follow him. I didn’t know where to start but I figured he might have a warrant. I figured that because his mother said he was constantly in trouble with the legal authorities. So, I guess I asked the wrong question of the right people.”

“Why do you want to follow him?”

John sighed. “Okay, we’ll waste a lot of time for no reason for you. My wife, Virginia Rose, is missing. She disappeared about three months ago. I believe Brian Sarath will leave Topeka, find my wife, and kill her. Therefore, I am here to follow him until I find her. Then I will try to stop him from killing her.”

“Why do you believe that he will leave Topeka?”

“Because I do. I don’t remember this area from any of my dreams. He’ll find her in a mountain area where I don’t know. I just know he will.”

“Why would he wish to kill your wife?”

John put his head in his hands. “Will you just tell me what this is all about? You’re wasting your time associating me with anything he’s done. I never met the man. You’re wasting my time also. I want to find my wife and have a normal life again.”

“Why would he wish to kill your wife?”

John sighed. “Virginia Rose One, will you provide some help here. This man has a thick skull, and I know there’s little time left. I don’t want Virginia to die for this man’s stupidity.”

Virginia One’s voice was sympathetic. “I agree, John. The problem is that he’s free already, and they feel someone is here to help him. They do not understand what they faced in the maximum-security prison. In the aftermath of the demonic presence, they are shocked and very frantic at the mention of his name. They cannot believe that he could have done it by himself.”

“He’s free already?” John asked, not looking at Jenkins.

“Yes, he is,” said One.

“Then what do I do? If he’s gone, then I came here for nothing. Why didn’t you tell me, and I wouldn’t have left Delaware? Sometimes you don’t make sense.”

Virginia One laughed. “Right, John. It’s because you do not think like me.”

“Right. I don’t think like a dead woman, and I’m rather glad of that.”

Detective Jenkins regarded John very oddly. “Who are you talking to? How did you know Saratha is gone?”

“Virginia Rose One told me.”

“Let me speak, John,” Virginia One requested. “After all, that’s why you’re here. I needed a lover of the Roses here to help them understand and to stop the intense and irrational fear.”

“Okay, Virginia, speak through me.”

“Detective Jenkins, you have overextended your routine investigative techniques. As a result, you fail to understand clearly what happened. Please turn around and face the mirrored window.”

Detective Jenkins looked at John deadpan. “I’m in charge here, Mr. Bennington.”

Jenkins’ chair rose from the floor and turned in the air until it faced the window.

“Your banal rudeness will not be tolerated, Detective Jenkins. You are in charge, and you wish to learn. So, do as I ask, and you will learn.”

Jenkins tried to move and could not.

The window fogged, and the interior of the prison came into view. John and Jenkins watched as Brian Sarath shot his way out of the cell block and ran down a corridor heading toward the entrance of the building. Behind him, five guards lay dead or dying. He kept changing guns as he went. He did not hesitate when he reached the 3-inch-thick steel door, he hit it with his shoulder, and it fell, ripped from its hinges. He made it through a barricade and left four more guards dead. He continued outside, and John counted three bullet holes in the back of his shirt.

Brian made it to the yard, and the siren wailed. He grinned and headed for the gate, running fast. Thirty feet away, he jumped, cleared the top of the gate, and fell to the ground on the other side. He rolled around on the ground as if hurt for a brief time. Then he stood and ran across a field and disappeared.

“That’s how it happened, Detective Jenkins. He did not need the assistance of John Bennington here or anyone. What you are dealing with is not exactly a man. He is half-demon and will remain that way until he meets with the roses. You will find no connection anywhere on this earth to attach his escape to a conspiracy theory. Do you understand?”

Jenkins nodded. “You’re free to go, Mr. Bennington. Sorry to have delayed you.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Virginia Rose helped Susan get all the children into the car and wished her a safe journey. Susan waved goodbye and departed for Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to spend the weekend with her sister. Virginia refused the offer of the house and took a room at the Paradise Inn for three days. She kept the front door key at Susan's insistence, just in case. She got into her car and drove to the dance studio to see Mark. She went through their dance routines, and she loved it. She felt the braces would be off entirely and forever within the month. When they finished, Mark went home to get ready for their date. Virginia went to the hotel and sat on the bed alone for a moment before she did the same.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "I feel strange. Is the last one near?"

"Not yet, but he will be soon," came the answer. "Go and do not fear. Enjoy, Mark."

The depression departed, and she smiled. "Prepare yourself, Mark," she said demurely. "You're going to be in pleasant trouble soon."

Mark picked her up at the hotel and took her to the Log Cabin Restaurant in La Vale. The atmosphere had a rustic charm, and it made her feel rugged.

"Now I know where to come if I need strength. I like it."

"It's about the best the area has to offer. I like the interior design. I don't mind that they don't have a wine selection. I prefer the family feeling."

"You want a family?"

"Yes, I do. I'm just waiting for the right woman." He winked and enjoyed the blush and break in her composure.

"Umm. Well, you might not have to look far. Maybe you don't have to look anymore."

Mark studied her response and liked the look on her face. She radiated love, and it fit her well.

"Will you not fail to call me when you need me?" he asked.

"I will," she said softly. "I'll always turn to you for help. I don't mind because I'm growing more in love with you each day."

Mark felt captivated by the light in her eyes. He did not move for a long time.

"Like what you see?"

"Like? No. Cherish is more appropriate." He felt dizzy. "You affect me like no other woman has."

"You affect me also. I crave you when I'm not with you. You are a flawless gem in the mountains that no one else can recognize."

He inhaled, held his breath, and thought, "She's going to give you an invitation soon, Self. Can we handle this?"

"You bet," replied Self. "You let her get away, and I'll divorce you."

He shivered. "Are you ready to go?"

"Huh?" she asked, looking confused. "Uh, yes, I am. I was too busy gazing into your eyes."

She blushed, slid her chair back, and stood. "Whoa, Self," she said. "This is going to turn hot any moment. This is good. I hope he doesn't refuse."

"Refuse you? You must be kidding. Once you say go, it will be all ten peckers working at once."

"Then definitely we can handle it, Self."

"Excuse me?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said and blushed again. "Let's go before I can't talk straight anymore."

He drove back to Cumberland and to her hotel.

"Come inside, Mark. I don't want to be alone right now. I'm getting used to you, I think."

She opened the door and slipped out of his car.

He put his arm around her, and they walked to her room.

He sat in the armchair, and she sat on the bed.

"Mark." She shrugged and stared at him. "I feel like, like this is all so, so new. Say something, please."

She sighed again when he remained silent. "Mark, I can't stand this separation, love. Come on over here and kiss me, please. I don't know what's going on, but I can't wait. Come on. Please touch me."

She lay back, and he lay by her side. He made himself comfortable where he could use his hands and kiss her.

"This is good, love. You have your invitation. Let's hope it works as good as I feel right now."

He unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it open. He ran his hand across her exposed skin and down her stomach. He traced a line around her navel and then back up to her breasts. She rolled over, moved her arms out of her blouse, and unfastened her bra. She slid it off and lay back down.

She mouthed a silent, I love you and closed her eyes.

She felt his lips lightly caress her left nipple, sighed, and relaxed as his hand moved across her chest and to her stomach. It moved around in small, pleasant circles as his lips sucked her nipple inside his mouth. She ran her fingers through his hair.

"Oh, John," she whispered. "The things you do to my body and mind. I'm glad we're married, or else I'd feel immoral."

He moved his mouth away from her breast.

"What did you say?" he whispered.

"I said you're doing wonderful, immoral things to my body and mind, John," she whispered. "Don't stop now. I feel that this hotel will have to pay for some sheets in the morning. They're going to rip with ease. I might even rip the mattress here."

Her eyes snapped open. "What did I say? Why did I do that?"

She glanced at her arms. They had goosebumps raised on her skin, and she felt cold.

"What's happening to me? I don't like this. Help me, please."

"I don't know how to help you. I think this attempt to expand the relationship may have triggered a memory in your mind."

"I remember. I was married before. He wasn't you. He was John, but where is he? I had a daughter, also. I remember that and a son."

She looked at her bare chest and sighed. "Oh, darling, what am I going to do? The feelings for you are so strong. But what if I'm not free to marry? This hurts me. What am I going to do?"

Mark shook himself and sat back, exhaling noisily through tight lips.

"What we'll do is wait," he said, unable to hide the disappointment in his voice. He buttoned his shirt and sat back.

"I'm sorry. I feel guilty now. This memory makes me feel like I've cheated on you. I don't know this other man, but I know you. Why didn't I keep my mouth shut until you were finished?"

“That wouldn’t have made it right,” Mark said.

She lay back on the bed, disliking the fact that his statement did little to ease her guilt. “If you want to, you may. I love you enough to share myself with you.”

“That’s not enough, Virginia. Please understand me, sweetheart. If I make love with you tonight, I’ll want to do it forever, with you, only you. I want to have one or two children and have you as my wife and their mother. I can’t handle you as a mistress. I want to share all parts of you and your life, not just the bed and sex.”

She opened her eyes and nodded in agreement.

“Don’t apologize anymore. Just sit up, and let’s get you covered, so they don’t tempt me. They look too good uncovered.”

She smiled weakly and sat up. “Can we still date? Maybe I’ll find out I am free, and we can keep in touch with dates when I pass through.”

“That’s fine. I’ll just put myself on hold until we know.”

“You’re a Godsend,” she declared. She dressed and leaned against the headboard.

“Delaware. We lived in Delaware. So why am I here, and what am I doing? Why do I tell everyone that I’m from Chicago? I’ve never been to that city. At least I don’t think I have.”

“Bennington was his last name?” asked Mark.

“Yes. John Adam Bennington.”

Mark picked up the phone, dialed the operator, requested the phone number for John Adam Bennington in Dover, Delaware, and wrote it down. Then, he handed the number and the phone to her. “This is one way to find out.”

Suddenly she felt nervous. “What if he’s there? Can’t we leave and go to California or Canada?”

He chuckled at her angst and dialed the number for her. He handed the receiver to her and moved to the chair.

“Hello,” she said a moment later. “I might sound strange, I’m bewildered right now, lost, and confused all to hell, but I’m looking for John Bennington. I think. I don’t know. Do you know him?”

“Virginia Rose!” John exclaimed. “Where have you been? Damn, Woman, I’ve missed you. Are you okay? Has Brian found you?”

“What are you talking about? Slow down. I’m confused. I’ve lost much of my life since the accident in Chicago. I just remembered your name a few minutes ago. You missed me? How long have I been gone? I only know that I’ve been recovering from the traffic accident in Chicago for two years. A bus hit me and wrecked more than my car.”

John paused a moment. He detected that something was wrong, and he remembered Marlene. She had said that the roses unsealed her and released her memory of Walter and Saratha. He asked Virginia to wait a moment, and he covered the receiver.

“Virginia One, how can I communicate with her if she’s been sealed? This is difficult, you know.”

“My dear John, I never told you anything would be easy, only possible. Keep talking to her. We are ready to unseal her, and she will experience a vast mind expansion. You must tell her what she needs to know. That’s why she called. She’s submissive and wants to be instructed by her husband. Don’t you remember?”

Virginia stuck the receiver under a pillow when Mark stood and moved toward the door. “Mark don’t leave me. I still need you around tonight and for a few more nights. Please don’t do this to me. I’m confused, and I need your strength. Sit down, please?”

He stopped at the door and listened to the pleading tone of her voice. Her face matched her voice.

“Okay. This won’t be easy for me now. I don’t want to hurt.”

“I know, and I’ll try not to do that. I know that I need you around for a short time.”

He returned to his chair and listened to her talk with John. An hour later, he stood and stretched when she disconnected the call.

“That was very informative. He said I’ve been sealed.”

“Sealed? What does that mean?”

Virginia nodded. “That’s what he. . .”

The temperature in the room dropped to 28 degrees instantly, and Mark shivered as his lungs filled with icy air. He looked at the bed, and Virginia Rose sat, her gaze piercing the ceiling. Both her hands were raised, palms upward. Her face moved in tight arcs from right to left repetitively. Her body trembled, and Mark believed it was due to the drop in temperature. He closed the distance and tried to wrap the blanket from the bed around her. An electric shock struck him when he got his hands close to her, and he flew backward across the room. He sat up against the door and rubbed his arms. The wind howled outside, and a lightning bolt lit up the room. It slammed the door with full force, ripped it from the hinges, and slammed it into Mark. The clap of thunder that followed shook the hotel and broke the windows from the outside. The wind whipped every loose item against the opposing wall and then died. Several lightning strikes started fires and exploded cars in the lot, and fire alarms went berserk.

Inside Mark’s room, the temperature increased to normal instantly.

Virginia still trembled as she turned her head to find Mark. He jostled the door from him and moved out of the way.

“What was that?” he asked, sitting again, and taking care of where he put his hands. He saw glistening glass shards everywhere he looked. He noticed the hair on his arms still stood on end.

“Trouble,” said Virginia. “That was a greeting from Brian Saratha. He’s here, and we must go to Susan’s house. She’s been turned around, and she’s home. That’s a major problem. Toss me my shoes, hon.”

“What are you?” he asked but did as she requested.

“I’m a Virginia Rose.” She shook the glass from her shoes. “We’re going to correct ourselves and do some major healing tonight. Are you ready to help me?”

Mark nodded but did not voice his opinion. Instead, he stood and adjusted his clothes.

“I’ve done some crazy shit, but this tops them all, Self,” he thought.

“Nah, the two brunettes that seduced you and ripped you off after oral sex was crazier than this,” reminded Self.

“That doesn’t make sense, Self. Or am I missing something? I love this woman very sincerely, and I can’t have her. That’s not insane?”

“What she will do will require you, so it’s not crazy. Follow in silence sometimes. It’s okay. It will all come out well in the mix.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

John ran upstairs after the call from Virginia ended and talked with Samantha, Paula, and the children.

“She’s alive and well,” he told them cheerfully. “It won’t be long until we’re all back together, and life will be better, definitely to a greater degree.”

Samantha shared his excitement. “That’s good news, John. Will you be all right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine. First, I want to thank you for coming to help.”

“You’ve already thanked me. You’ve been a wonderful person to know. That’s thanks enough. I wish I could break down your goodness into a scent and market you. I’d be very wealthy.”

“You all go to bed,” he told the children and Paula.

He turned to Samantha.

“No problem, honey,” she said to his unasked question. “It never will be, now or in the future. Come on.”

Later as they all slept, Virginia Rose One and Ten dropped through the ceiling.

Virginia One commanded, “John, Samantha, arise. Come with us.”

Virginia Ten collected Dozen, Jacob, and Paula; all the family stood in John’s bedroom, alert and wondering at all the angelic lights.

“Let’s go,” Virginia One said. “We will correct ourselves this night.”

They all moved as one and flashed through the night sky. The areas above the clouds over Delaware were dark and foreboding, reflecting an evil ambiance. The same condition held all the way to where they stopped over Cumberland. They stopped and floated in the empty sky, waiting in silence.

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Virginia and Mark left the hotel as fire trucks, police, and ambulances arrived to assist the wounded and care for the dead. But, amid the mass confusion and chaos, no one noticed their departure.

Virginia sat behind the wheel and fastened her seat belt. She smiled warmly at Mark, started the engine, and stopped with her hand on the gear shift. She touched her legs; her braces were in the hotel, amongst the police and other people.

“I think I’m free of them, darling. Isn’t that great?”

Mark regarded her face and felt the gratitude she put into it for him. “It’s better than great.”

She put the car into gear and eased out onto the highway. She turned left, and then increased her speed, slowing only to make turns. Finally, she hit the pedal on the last left turn, shot past two speed traps, and never slowed down. She looked in the mirror at the red and blue lights pursuing her and shook her head.

“You won’t stop me tonight,” she told them.

She glanced ahead and saw a bridge sign. She smiled and raised her right hand into the air. When she cleared the bridge, she lowered the arm and pointed it behind her.

She kept driving and watched the first police car hit the bridge. It whirled in several circles, and the second slammed the brakes. It hit the first one without slowing down. The two spun a few times and came to rest disabled on the side of the road.

Virginia laughed. "The sign said the bridge might be icy, dudes. You should believe them. Signs don't lie."

Mark marveled at what she did and said, "You're a witch. A beautiful, charming, sexy, intelligent, and darling witch, but a witch anyway you look at it."

Virginia chuckled and reached across the car, feeling around until he found her hand. She pulled it to her and gave it a wet kiss.

She lightly scolded him. "Don't even think that. That's the wrong side."

"An angel, as if I didn't know."

"How about a Virginia Rose? That's what I am. I did that because they would interfere with us if I didn't. We can't afford the time to explain a two-hundred-fifty-year-old curse and the evil behind it to them. So, it's just best to keep them away. If not for that, I'd be in jail now, signing over my license, my life, the lives of my first three children, your life, and about fifty tickets."

"You're amazing, Virginia Rose! If I were sane, I'd jump out now and forget this whole thing. But, instead, I hope they seal you again, and I can take you away with me."

"Right now, so do I," she laughed again and released his hand.

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"She's arriving," Virginia Ten said.

The people in the clouds dropped silently to the ground. Virginia One ignored the rest but told John to sit on the grass underneath a tree by the sidewalk. She sat behind him, placed her arms under his, and raised her hands to his shoulders.

"Be strong, like the ocean, John. I want you to witness this, but you must be silent until it is completed."

She touched his mouth, and it ceased to work.

Virginia Rose pulled into the driveway quickly and stopped with a squeal of tires. She shut off the engine, opened the car door, reached under the front seat, and pulled out a gun. Spinning the cylinder once, she stepped outside, not closing the door. She paused a moment until Mark joined her.

"What do we do now?" he whispered.

"We wait a moment until we are cleared. Remember, the .357 Magnum is in the living room bookcase. It's in the book called Saratha Notash. I'll try to keep him occupied until you get it. He won't be happy then because he knows it will hurt him. Trust me on this, Mark."

"You got it, babe," he said. He bent down and kissed her cheek.

"Release all the Lines of Demarcations," Elizabeth's voice came across the air currents.

A shrill scream from the house split the silence, and Virginia Rose sprinted for the front door. However, before she reached it, the shriek came again.

Virginia entered the living room and turned the corner. Susan cringed in one corner of the dining room. Her back was pressed against the refrigerator, one hand covered her mouth, and one held her stomach. She made garbled retching noises instead of screams.

Virginia let her eyes adjust to the dark, and she saw Brian standing beside the dining room table, gazing at the top intently. A flash of lightning illuminated the windows and Virginia saw him raise a sword over his head. She watched it rise in a steady arc. Then, it stopped and began a

smooth and powerful downward path toward the top of the table. Her eyes flashed to the table top and before the lightning dissipated, she saw Susan's three children tied there. She did not have time to scream before the sword thudded into the wood of the table, severing Candy's head.

Virginia screamed and fought down the urge to vomit. Instead, she raised the gun and fired once. Brian's hands jerked to the side, and he dropped the sword. She darted around him, grabbed the sword from the floor, and slipped into the kitchen. She squatted and faced the dining room. He swore and she could make out his form, dropping and feeling for the sword.

"Conserve your ammunition," she told herself. She put the gun in her pants top and gripped the sword with both hands. Then, she put herself onto one knee and waited.

"Rose Bitch! You don't touch the sword. You don't have the right!"

"You can no longer tell me what to do, Brian Sarath," Virginia said with a voice of authority that surprised her. "You will not bring more harm and destruction to anyone who love and touch the roses."

He turned toward the kitchen.

Virginia held the sword and ran toward him with it raised over her head. She brought it down and buried it to the hilt through his chest.

He screamed and flung his hands around as he fell backward and landed on his hips. Virginia's momentum carried her into him, and he grabbed her with one strong hand. She continued to struggle toward the living room, and she twisted him around on the floor until he faced that direction. He held her firmly and rose to his knees and then to his feet.

"You don't understand, do you, Rose Bitch? The rules of the world don't hold here, even if you have not progressed to the final stage. You will NOT stop me."

He hit her in the face, and she flew and landed on her back in the living room. Her ears rang, and she saw many stars when she hit the floor.

She lay immobile and felt her face start tingling and then go numb. Finally, she took a deep breath and struggled to sit.

Outside, John felt the chilled wind increase in velocity. He looked at the sky, and jagged streaks of lightning pierced the night, followed by bone-shuddering thunder. He prayed for his Virginia Rose as Virginia One held him helpless.

Mark reached the steps and slipped through the door.

Virginia made it to a sitting position. Through lightning flashes, she watched Brian Sarath wiggle and pull at the sword in his chest. Before she stood, he had it out, and she watched him turn his attention to the table.

"This must stop," she said to herself. "I can't let him kill another one, or we will never be able to stop him."

She opened her mouth to speak, and a stab of pain stopped her. She tasted the warm blood inside her mouth and spat it on the floor.

"If he hits me once more, I'll be dead meat and useless."

She saw Mark slip inside and edge along the sofa toward the bookcases across the end of the living room. Virginia pulled her gun, and she aimed and fired during a flash of lightning. Unfortunately, the bullet hit his arm again, and the sword fell as he jerked to the left.

He screamed with rage and faced her. "Ignorant Rose Bitch! I will not tolerate this any longer!"

Virginia fired at his chest. He stumbled one step backward, and then moved toward her. She fired once more, and the bullet tore into his right knee. He twisted to the right and fell. She raced

toward him, avoided his grasping arm, and grabbed the sword once more. Again, she plunged it into his chest.

He grinned malevolently, and he lunged forward. He hit her in the chest with his right hand, and she landed on the floor in the kitchen again.

She held her chest and struggled to reach her knees, gasping for breath. Brian Sarath was up and had the sword, advancing steadily toward her.

“Elizabeth!” she shouted. “This won’t work! I’m not strong enough to fight him alone. You must help, or this slaughter will continue. I will fight him until I die, but what then? Please help me.”

John heard the frightened plea and Virginia One still held him fast. He looked at the sky and his eyes widened. The area above and around the house filled quickly with tiny points of light. They zipped and danced and then settled into a pattern.

“Is this the Cavalry?” he thought.

“Yes,” came the answer.

In the living room, Mark cursed the darkness and let his eyes search the titles of the books during the flashes of lightning. The rapid opening and closing of pupils frustrated him to no end. Finally, he located the book and grabbed it. He dropped it to the floor and held his pained hand that felt like it had burst into flames.

Saratha paused and glanced at the living room. He saw Mark holding his hand and the book on the floor. For the first time, he felt a twinge of fear. He turned entirely and stared hard at the man.

“You human piece of shit! You shouldn’t touch what you can’t handle. This Rose Bitch here isn’t worth your life, but you wish it, so give it up for her.”

He gripped the sword like a spear and flung it in Mark’s direction.

It sailed straight toward his chest, and he watched it move. He moved to his left in time, and it thunked into the books behind him. He grunted from the force of the fall and then righted himself. He grabbed the sword and hit the book on the floor. Sparks flew and the cover opened.

“This isn’t a .357 Magnum,” Mark complained as he viewed the single barrel, one-shot gun with an ivory grip. He picked it up anyway and looked toward the demon.

Brian Sarath stopped his advance and stared coldly at Mark.

“You will suffer for what you do. The Rose Bitch didn’t tell you that, did she? This single act will put you into hell, and I will rule you personally. It won’t stop me, but it will stop you.”

Mark hesitated.

“Take your sexy piece of woman and get out of here, Mark! I’ll forgive you and let it go. Since I’m a reasonable man, I’ll even kill her husband and children, so you’ll have her all the way.”

Mark pulled the trigger without answering and watched a vast white spot appear in Sarath’s stomach.

Brian Sarath screamed and did a whirling dance as his voice rose to a blood-curdling howl, and he fell to the floor. He sat up quickly and twisted to face Mark. He raised both hands over his head, balled his fists, and snapped them down.

Mark did not wait to see what happened. He dived to the right as a ball of heat crossed his back. The bookshelf caught fire. He grabbed the sword and threw the gun down. He looked at Sarath in the glow of the flames and saw the white spot doubled in size.

He raised the sword over his head and ran toward Brian Sarath, who growled and raised his hands again. He brought the blade down hard, and it struck the demon in the head and stopped when it reached the middle of his chest. He stared momentarily at the long thin V visible in the fire flames. Then, he ran toward the dining room and met Virginia Rose there.

"It's not over!" she said breathlessly. "Quick, untie them and get them out! Leave the dead one."

John watched the lights dance and whirl. Then, from his left, one light shot downward in a straight line and hit the side of the house. A crashing sound and a bright flash of light erupted as a huge section of the house flew into the air and disintegrated in the heat. A second light followed, and the back side of the place erupted in a loud explosion.

Virginia Rose grabbed Susan from the corner, half carrying and half dragging her outside. Finally, she lay her on the ground and ran back inside.

Another light streaked down and hit the left side of the house. The second explosion sounded, and flames shot through the roof. Mark came out with one child and lay it beside the mother. He ran back into the house after Virginia Rose and saw her standing before Brian Sarath.

"You really should give it up now," she told him, "but I know you won't. You'll fight until you are destroyed."

She grabbed the sword and pulled it from his chest. She waited until Mark cleared the door with the last living child and followed him.

John watched her lean against Mark and kiss him ardently. He then turned his attention to the house, and he struggled against Virginia One's hands.

"No! Let me go!"

"It would do you no good, John. Let it be. You can't stop it at this level."

Brian Sarath stood in the doorway, his head weaving from side to side. "You Rose Bitch!" the noise growled from his chest. "You will not succeed."

Virginia Rose turned and faced him once more. She took a few steps toward him and stopped. "The sword will fall from the master this time. You are finished. Accept it."

He growled and raised his hands. Virginia ran up the four steps and once more struck him with the sword. He fell backward, and she grabbed the door frame to stop herself from following. She moved back down the stairs.

From the sky, seven lights shot downward, and all struck Sarath where he fell. The remaining lights over the house spun and moved, forming a net of light strings that lowered on the house. The place erupted, and a howling white form shot through the net and headed straight for Virginia Rose when it fell. It hit her head on, and both disappeared beneath the ground.

John screamed but still he could not move.

The earth shook, and the ground beside him shifted. A considerable gap appeared, and one side shot twenty feet into the air, throwing Mark across the driveway, and overturning the cars. Twenty blazing lights went into the opening and from the steadily widening gap came a hideous scream and a brilliant flash of light. A huge section of the right side of the gap lurched skyward and fell to the earth, burying the cars and Mark.

The tremors and shock waves stopped, and a deathlike silence gripped the area. Virginia Rose scrambled to the surface, lost, and confused, and her hands shook and twitched in uncontrolled patterns.

"Mark? Where are you? Mark?"

She searched frantically and saw his hands sticking out of the dirt in the driveway. She ran to him and cleared the dirt away from his face.

He gasped for breath and spit out some of the fine dirt.

“Oh, Mark!” She held his head and gawked at the huge rock that had landed on his legs and stomach. “Oh, Mark, darling. No!”

“Virginia, I’m not going to make it. Were we a success?”

“Yes! Please don’t die. I love you and I want you to live. Please hold on!”

“I love you, Virginia Rose. Unfortunately, I’ll have to go now.”

“No!” She lay his head down and scrambled to her feet.

“Mamma! Elizabeth! Come here, quickly. Take me to the mountain. Quickly! I don’t want to lose his love. Take me, swiftly, please. I must hold onto his love.”

Elizabeth and Virginia Ten appeared before her with extended hands.

“Most excellent, Daughter,” said Ten. “Come, let us go.”

They disappeared instantly, and Virginia One released John.

She waved her hands, and they reversed the journey to Delaware. John noticed the difference in the covering of the earth below them. The darkness was gone, and in its place were clouds and areas of blue, white, pink, yellow, and orange. It still exuded trouble, but not the ominous evil atmosphere as before.

*

In John’s bedroom, the silence broke, and everyone tried to talk at once. Samantha took the children and left John alone with Virginia One.

“Are you troubled, John?”

“Yes. I couldn’t help picking up on Virginia’s emotions and feelings. She’s very intensely in love with Mark.”

“She is. Is that wrong?”

John shrugged. “I guess it’s like Samantha and me, but I know she didn’t let the feelings turn physical. She didn’t have sex with him like I did Samantha.”

Virginia One shook her head, understanding the turmoil in his mind but feeling helpless. There was no way to explain what he needed to know.

“However, there is a difference, John. Are the memories of the first two nights with Samantha still fresh?”

“They are,” John declared. “I wish not.”

“Will you close your eyes, John?”

John did and opened them when she told him. He looked briefly at his face in the mirror. It was twisted and ugly, filled with deep furrows, scar tissue, and running sores. He grimaced and turned his face quickly to the left.

He shivered from the view. “That’s disgusting, Virginia One! What’s the point?”

“If you had not listened to Samantha and rejected Julie, this would have been the result. This might be too deep for you, for you have not gone far enough into the mind of your Virginia Rose. That will come soon. Just listen to me and trust me on this matter.

“If you mated with Julie while the black wine was in her, you would have lost Virginia. You would have been with Julie forever, and you would be lost with her. The reason is that every time Virginia looked at you, the face in the mirror is what she would see. Could you expect her to live with you and forgive what you had done?”

He shook his head.

“You may turn your head. The face is gone. With Samantha, there will be no question of your mating with her. When this night is finished, Virginia Rose will know what happened and never mention it. Samantha is sterile. It is not like people refer to it as being unable to bear children. Her sterility is such that if you told Virginia that you wished to mate with Samantha when she is around, Virginia would smile and tell you to do it and to enjoy it. There would be only truth in the statement and no anger or jealousy when you did it. Does that make sense?”

John shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. I can’t relate to that.”

She sighed and stopped and felt at a loss. “Well, hold on to that. Don’t let it be a problem between you and Virginia Rose. It will only bother her, and you don’t need to beat yourself over any issue. Maybe someday it will be explained to you.

“Right now, wake up and go in the flesh. Go to the home of Sarah Morgan Johns. Wait there for us. I must join my sisters in the sun.”

She kissed him and disappeared.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Virginia stood on the mountainside in Switzerland with Elizabeth and Virginia Ten. She felt anxious and twitched nervously.

“Relax, Virginia,” Elizabeth said.

“We must hurry! Mark’s too close to death. Don’t want to wait!”

Elizabeth smiled knowingly. “Your love is pure and intense, Daughter. Relax. All the progression of life is frozen, held by the Lines of Demarcations. Mark will be caught in the healing. Worry yourself no more.”

Virginia sat and sighed heavily and felt over her face. It hurt almost everywhere she touched it. She felt the throbbing in her right jawbone. It was a constant irritating pain she could do without. She felt sharp, aching pains in her chest with each breath. The muscles in her legs would occasionally scream when they tightened in cramps. Both her arms were tight and sore from the fight with Brian Sarath. She clenched and relaxed her sore and throbbing hands as her stomach ached and churned from nervousness and anxiousness.

“And I got to go to the bathroom,” she whispered. “You’re a mess, Virginia Rose Bennington. You look like someone hit you with the whole earth, and you married a man who can’t kiss right. I don’t know about you sometimes.”

The air filled with static, crackling, and buzzing sounds. She forgot herself for a moment and looked at the sky around her. From all directions came tiny blazing balls of light. They met and formed spirals, starting from the center, and building on each other toward the outside. For several minutes they came, and soon Virginia could feel the radiated heat from their combined light. Then they doubled in size, and she squinted her eyes to permit watching them. Finally, the solid blazing ball rose slightly above the ledge where Virginia sat and hung in the sky.

Elizabeth moved behind Virginia and massaged her shoulders.

“Are you ready, Virginia?”

“Yes, I am.” She nearly cried from the touch of the hands. “That feels so good.”

Elizabeth moved her hands and rested them on the horizontal rod.

Virginia sank back against the post and sighed heavily.

“What if I can’t?” she asked.

“You will when I tell you to,” Elizabeth promised and moved in front of Virginia and to her left.

“Tell us, Virginia Rose Bennington, why was this done?”

“Because of two acts that lacked providence. The first was Virginia Rose Merriweather. She chose to terminate her life in a moment of pain and trusted men to act out of character in maintaining secrets. She should have waited for Nathan to return. Then the two could have aroused the entire community, and justice would have been done. Instead, she disregarded the life principle, and with no provident thought, she opened the door for the evil that was terminated a short time ago.

“The second act was Nathan. His turn to alcohol placed him in the pubs where the men who raped Virginia Rose liked to spend their time. With tongues loosed by whisky and ale, they talked of their sexual prowess and Virginia’s body. Nathan then chose to act rationally and pursue the truth of Virginia’s death. Unfortunately, he was caught in an evil plan when he found it. Nathan applied the curse upon the entire McNaulty family through many generations with no

provident thought. However, if it were necessary for a curse to be invoked, he should have applied it to only the one Judge McNaulty.

“Because of the two, many people have had their lives ravished by the evil of Saratha and Brian Sarath. Now we will heal those who remain and hopefully I will give the future generations of the Roses providence, love, kindness, self-control, and self-discipline.”

“What of the pain you suffered?”

“It was not given to me to be suffered as punishment. It was caused by the evil of Brian Sarath to stop me from living or at least to stop me from caring about life and love. Either way, he would have gained the necessary power to cause severe damage to the world. That’s why he infected Julie with the black wine and had her try to seduce John. But, again, that would have hurt me, and I would have ceased to care.”

Elizabeth smiled. “You have learned well, Virginia. What about the child within?”

“The child within? Oh, yes, I’m pregnant. She will have red hair and blue eyes from birth but look much different from Dozen. She will be the new, improved version, with petals of metal that no one can dent. She will be a true leader of women, filled with providence and caring for humanity. As Dozen was to end the pain, she will be to the beginning of the new unstoppable love.”

Elizabeth raised one hand toward the ball of light in the sky, and a tongue of fire erupted and connected with her. She touched the top of Virginia Rose’s head with the other hand.

Virginia whimpered from the heat and pressure that she knew would split her head open. Her eyes crossed, and her head refused to hold upright. Instead, it lolled around like she was intoxicated. She caught her breath as the heat burned slowly down her body and through her arms and legs.

“Wow,” she sighed as her eyesight returned, and she could hold her head straight. “Wow! That was a trip!” She took an inventory of her aches and pains, and she could find none.

“The first time on this mountain, you gave up much. This time you must give up little, Virginia.”

Virginia looked confused for a moment. “Mark?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said.

“Can’t I keep them both?”

Elizabeth shook her head.

“Why do you do this when I’m bound and have no chance to argue?” Virginia asked.

“Because I know you. You don’t need both men as husbands. Although the strength of your love could do it easily, one husband is sufficient.”

She sighed in surrender. “Okay. I must be provident, right? Don’t worry, Elizabeth. I would have figured it out eventually.”

She gripped the rod and began to turn it in the opposite direction than the first time. Elizabeth moved to stand behind her, and Ten went into the light. A large tongue of fire came from the light and struck Virginia Rose on her chest. From there it radiated beams of light in many directions across the sky.

*

In Sarah Johns’ home, John paced the floor. Richard, Julie, Jeff, Ralph, and Samantha watched him and eventually told him to sit down, or else they would tie him to a chair. The

children watched television, and Sarah slept upstairs in bed. John lasted fifteen minutes and then went to the window once more.

Dozen jumped up from the floor when he sat back down.

“Whee!” she cried, nudging Jacob with her foot. “Come on, Jacob. Come quick, Paula. Elizabeth is here!”

She darted from the room, and Jacob was close behind her. The two clambered up the stairs, ran to Sarah’s room, and scrambled on the bed. They lay, one on either side of Sarah, right against her shoulders, laughing and kissing her face.

John and the rest of the crowd entered, and they covered their eyes when the flash of light filled the room. When they looked again, Sarah’s eyes were open and she stared around the room, almost fearful. Her arms twitched and she made some grunting sounds.

John could see the outline of a glowing woman, wearing a white dress with a large flare and layered with red silk and lace. Her red hair was done in long tight curls. A white and yellow rose adorned one side of her head. She looked at Sarah on the bed.

Sarah struggled to sit up.

“Come on, Jacob,” said Dozen. “Help her.”

The two children moved behind her and pushed on her shoulders until she could sit up the rest of the way.

“Please,” Sarah begged. Her outstretched hands groped for a hold and tears rolled down her cheeks. “Hurts.”

Elizabeth touched Sarah’s feet.

Sarah screamed and her feet glowed a bright blue. The color moved up her legs and toward her body. She squealed again and fell back on the bed, her arms flopping haphazardly.

Dozen and Jacob clapped and laughed and together they kissed her face again.

“Sarah feels good,” Dozen said and bounced on the bed. “Sarah feels good, Jacob.”

“Yes,” agreed Jacob. “Looks more beautiful and loving too.”

Elizabeth smiled at them. “Hey children.”

Together they scrambled to the foot of the bed.

“Yes, Elizabeth,” Dozen said. “You are pretty today.”

“Thanks, my lovely child. What about Paula?”

Jacob looked around the room and he did not see Paula. He looked confused at all the adults and blinked his eyes.

“She’s in another room,” Dozen said.

Jacob beat her to the door, and they raced down the hallway. He opened the door and Paula sat in a corner crying.

Immediately Paula rejected them. “Go away! I can’t do it.”

“Yes, you can,” Dozen insisted. “Tonight, the pain will stop.”

Paula shook her head. “Not for me! I’m too evil and dirty. Just go and leave me to suffer.”

Dozen shook her head and cautioned Jacob. “Nasty things are here, little brother. They’re hurting Paula, be careful.”

Jacob nodded and stared at Paula intently.

Dozen approached the corner. “You’re wrong, Paula. The bad things want to keep you. You can’t do that. Send them away.”

“You don’t understand, Dozen. It’s me. I’m the nasty thing. I’m not worthy of being good.”

Dozen closed her eyes.

“Elizabeth, what do I do? There are nasty feelings and creatures here,” she asked.

“Hold Jacob’s hand and touch her,” Elizabeth said. “They know their limits and they know better than to harm you but hold Jacob’s hand to stop him from being hurt.”

Dozen caught and held Jacob’s hand tightly. She moved closer to the corner and Paula cringed away, flattening against the wall, and screaming.

“No, don’t! I wanted to hurt, really!”

“Liar,” said Dozen. “You told me you wanted to stop.”

Paula moved out of the corner quickly and along the left wall. Dozen darted quicker and caught the hem of her dress. It was enough to cause a fall.

Before she could move away, Dozen and Jacob both sat on her and Dozen touched her neck.

Paula made a choking sound and struggled to get away. Dozen held her hand in place and watched as many tiny black crawling things came from her mouth and ears. They all chattered and rushed to the walls, up and out the window. Paula cried out once and lay still.

Dozen and Jacob, both kissed her. Samantha came to the room, picked up the limp girl and carried her back to Sarah’s bed.

Elizabeth touched Paula on her forehead and Sarah sat up on the bed.

Sarah cradled her like a child and soothed her. “Soon you’ll hurt no more. It is so great to feel good, whole, and complete.”

Paula cried out and swung her arms. Sarah grabbed her hands and held them. The glowing blue light worked its way down her body to her feet and she lay limp and sweating on the bed. Sarah continued holding her and hummed a song.

Elizabeth touched Sarah once more and she gasped.

“As you love, as you wish, it will be done, Sarah. Patience for the healing to complete its cycle,” she said.

Sarah nodded and the teardrops flowed once more. “You are so magnificent, Elizabeth. No Virginia Rose ever could match you.”

Elizabeth turned to Julie. “Your turn, my dear white rose.” She touched her and Julie collapsed to the floor.

There followed another flash of light and Elizabeth departed the room.

“Wow!” exclaimed the men simultaneously. “That was an awesome display of power.”

*

At Berkwood West the quiet night was shattered with a clap of thunder that shook the building and rattled the windows. A bolt of lightning hit one end of each four floors. The lightning spiraled and raced down the hallways, pressing guards, nurses, and attendants against the wall, and holding them in place, even after its departure. Separate rolls of light zipped through the holes left by the energy of the bolts and split off into every room in the building. The nurses listened with helpless anxiety to the shrieks and screams of terror coming from the patients’ rooms.

Soon the hallways of the hospital filled with dark, black, brown, green, ugly, and shabby creatures that the nurses and guards could not describe. Some of them were so hideous that the nurses screamed and fainted from their sight. The creatures ran, shuffled, slithered, and crawled around the hallway howling in confusion and anger.

Once again, there came the vibrations of the thunder, and many more lightning bolts hit the hospital walls, scorching and tearing holes in their entry.

Fire balls followed and crisscrossed the hallways to form a net of flames. They increased in temperature until they flashed out of existence and left the nurses and guards blind for a moment. The hallways filled with smoke and the smell of sulfur and some other odors that gagged the employees.

Doors and windows were ripped from the walls, from the inside out. Wind whipped in tunnels throughout the building, clearing the smoke and ashes that remained. With the calming of the winds, the nurses watched, no longer fearful as the hallways filled with shimmering forms of women moving slow and gracefully among the rooms opening doors. They listened that time to sounds of pleasure.

Elizabeth passed the employees on each floor and gave them instructions.

“You will not interfere with the healing process. You will continue to care for them for maybe three days at the most and the hospital will be empty then. You will give them no drugs. If you interfere, you will become like they were before. Do you disbelieve the Virginia Rose?”

No one argued with her.

*

In Cumberland, Susan sat on her lawn, holding the two children she had left. She gazed anxious and bewildered at the smoldering remains of her house. Along the street, the neighbors teamed, and the baffled police and firemen and ambulances scratched their heads at the scene. Susan could hear nothing, but she watched them and finally figured out that they could not reach her or the man who sometimes screamed in pain. His screams bothered her, but it was hopeless to go to him. She gave the idea up when she saw the size of the rock that crushed him. She felt incredibly sorrowful that she could not locate Virginia Rose. She feared that she might have fallen into the deep crater that split her lawn and the basement of her house.

Suddenly, the morning sky came to life with noise and light. Women descended gracefully and came to rest on the lawn around Susan. Susan cowered and held her crying children tightly.

Two women went to Mark and with the wave of their hands, the rock lifted and moved back toward the crater. Both women kneeled by his shoulders and pressed their hands on his head. He screamed at first and then he gradually switched to moans and then he lost consciousness.

Several others surrounded Susan and separated her from the two children. Over her protests, two women took one child each and held them in their arms. With hands of orange and yellow light, they touched the children and Susan watched their bodies start into convulsions.

“Please don’t,” she cried. “You’re hurting them.”

Elizabeth touched Susan. She fell immediately to the ground and lay silent. “You have suffered enough, Susan. It is finished. Sleep in peace. When you awaken, you will have no memories of being married to a demon. You will not hurt for the two dead children. You will be healed, and you will live in peace with the two children left to you. The strength and safety you prayed for are granted.”

She clapped her hands and several more Virginia Roses appeared on the lawn.

“Seal this place against all interference until their healing is complete. Do it with your presence and send the others away.”

The women turned and waved their hands at the people wandering in the streets. Very quickly the crowd dwindled to nothing.

Elizabeth nodded with satisfaction. She vanished and stopped inside Marlene McNaulty's cell.

She snapped her fingers. "Awaken, Marlene," she commanded.

"What?" Marlene yawned.

"The Virginia Roses have not forgotten you, my dear. Within the hour, the Governor will be here with a full pardon to give you the freedom you deserve and have waited too long to experience. You, among the others, have suffered the most. But you will not be sealed this time, Marlene. The memories that torture you will be removed completely and permanently. Your body and mind will be restored, and you will finish your life in peace."

"Brian Sarath is finished then?" she asked anxiously.

"He is."

"Then I will be happy to live with no memories. Thank you, very much."

"Sleep now, so we may work for you," Elizabeth said.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Virginia Bennington sat in her office and looked at the wheel chair while she drummed her fingers on the desk top.

“You served me well; but this week, you’ll be donated to someone who can use you. Don’t think I don’t like you; you just need to move along and find someone else to help. Okay?”

The bars that she used to help herself into and out of her daybed were stored in the basement. She looked at the bed and imagined Samantha making love with John there.

“John’s a trip.” She turned to look at her mother’s picture once more.

“He’s so unique that I wouldn’t trade him for a million dollars. He’s just too sweet. Kind of thick sometimes, but we’ll work it out.”

She picked up the phone and made a call.

“Hello, Virginia,” Samantha said. “How did you get my number here in Cumberland?”

“I’ve been there, remember?”

Samantha chuckled as the memory kicked in. “Oh, yes. Thanks for letting me know about this guy. He’s the greatest.”

“So are you,” sighed Virginia. “And as a result, you have a man addicted to your body.”

“John?” She sobered at the tone of Virginia’s voice. “Didn’t the Roses explain it to him?”

“Elizabeth tried, but, yes, dear, he is. He also has this big guilt trip because he had sex with you. He’s a great guy, but he is thick-headed at times.”

“Oh, wow,” said Samantha, sad. “I never considered that when I went to him. Wow! It’s a nice ego boost for me, but not for you. I’ll have to think about this. I didn’t know he would end up addicted. How bad is he?”

“He doesn’t want to hug or kiss me, and when I tell him what he did with you is okay, he sighs and clams up. I don’t know what to tell him that will cause a change, Sam. I’m, like, at a dead end. I know I should be able to do this alone, but help.”

“Maybe Mark and I will drive over this weekend, and I’ll think of something. Genevieve Scents doesn’t pay me \$75 thousand a year plus bonuses and benefits to tell the difference between dog dooky and roses. So, I promise you, I’ll think of something.”

She arrived on Friday evening, and she sat with Virginia Rose and Mark. She explained what she planned to do with John.

“If the addiction is that bad, it should still work without using the perfumes I used before. Is that okay, Mark?”

Mark shook his head. “All you roses are weird sometimes, Samantha. Go ahead. I don’t mind if it helps.”

John arrived, and it pleased him to see Samantha there. But unfortunately, the same feeling did not apply to Mark.

Samantha met him in the middle of the kitchen and kissed him. He sat his briefcase on the counter and squeezed her tightly.

“Gosh, it’s good to see you,” he said.

“It’s pleasurable to see you too.” She rubbed her forehead on his chest.

She moved her face back to see him. “Hey, do you want to go to Virginia’s office and make love? I’d sure like that. It’s been so long and that’s all I could think of the last three days. What do you say?”

John looked confused and glanced at Virginia.

"Go ahead, John. I don't mind. I'm pregnant anyway. Enjoy yourself."

The confusion increased, and he wrinkled his eyebrows deeply.

"Come on," Samantha whispered and kissed him again. "I can't wait to have you nibbling my nipples. I like that a lot."

John kissed her and followed her without looking at Virginia again.

"I'd love to have that power over a man," Virginia said.

"You do," Mark told her.

Her eyes widened; she blushed, cleared her throat, and apologized. "Sorry, I sometimes don't forget what I should."

He chuckled. "Thanks for Samantha. She's a great woman."

*

Samantha lay across the bed and John kissed her passionately.

"This is strange," he whispered. "How can I do this when Virginia is here in the house and knowing what's going on?"

"Just like you're doing now. She doesn't mind, and you make me feel so great; I don't mind either. Stop talking and start kissing me."

He moved his face, and he rubbed the nipple on her left breast. "I like the way it starts so soft and small and then gets bigger."

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. She reached under the pillow with her right hand and removed a small aerosol can. She sprayed it around the head of the bed and down across her body.

He sniffed and shook his head. "What is that? It smells like lemon with a touch of cedar."

"It should since that's what it is," Samantha said. "Put your lips back on my body, lover."

He lowered his face and sniffed again. He raised his head.

"Something's wrong," he said.

She held his face in her hands. "Hello, John."

"Hello, Samantha."

"What are you doing, John?"

"I'm kissing your breasts."

"How does it feel?"

"Good, I like the. . ."

"What?"

"I like the taste of your skin there. Your nipples and body taste so different than Virginia's. Why is that? Why does yours taste so good?"

"Hello, John, this is Samantha here. What are you doing?"

"Kissing your breasts. Wait! Why am I kissing you?"

"Because you like me, but you weren't kissing my breasts."

He looked into her eyes first and then at her breasts. They were still covered with her bra, and the tips were damp.

"What the . . .?"

She smiled warmly and said, "Welcome back, John. How can you kiss my breasts without uncovering them?"

"I can't. What did you do?"

"I'm a witch. Look, my man, I like you very much. You're really a great guy, and I'm attracted to you. You don't know how hard it was for me to keep my pants on with you. So, either you uncover me and do it for real, or let me get out of bed. If you do me, Virginia will leave with Mark, and I'll stay with you. It's your choice, John."

He moved to the foot of the bed and watched while Samantha slipped on her tee shirt.

"I did it with the tape," she explained. "The tape set your mind in the right mood, and the scents did the rest. They triggered the genuine feelings of orgasm, including the emotions, but you never did it physically. I'm sorry. I never once took off my jeans when I slept with you. I had to bite my tongue and grit my teeth a few times. It was torture, feeling what you did to me and not going farther, but I didn't."

He rubbed his mouth and slapped himself. "I said that life with Virginia Rose would be exciting and different. I wasn't far from right."

She laughed. "Are you angry with me?"

He threw up his hands. "Not with you. With myself, yes, a little. I guess I make late discoveries about some things. Were you serious about it being hard to resist me?"

"Yes! So, from now on, cut back on the passionate kisses, okay. Keep them social. Let's be like Virginia and Mark. I'll wear him out and you wear her out. Deal?"

He laughed. "Deal, my imaginary mistress."

*

The Bennington's back yard was filled with guests: Sarah and Richard Johns, Julie and Jeff Morrison, Shirley, Samantha, and Mark Daniels.

Paula kept track of Dozen and Jacob most of the time. She considered the women present and decided to have some fun. She poured a glass of iced tea and joined the adults on the deck.

"I think we should make a toast to all the pregnant women here," she announced. "Will all the women who are with child, please stand one at a time lest the deck collapse from the combined weight."

Virginia, who was seven months pregnant, stood and got a round of applause.

Paula looked at Shirley. "Well," she asked.

Shirley blushed, and after a moment, she stood.

John's brows raised. "Shirley, how did that happen?"

She blushed again when the people laughed. "It wasn't supposed to. However, it did. It just sneaked up on me and said, 'Surprise.'"

Next Julie stood and made a slight bow.

"What?" said Jeff. "Are you serious? When did that happen?"

"It happened when you weren't looking or expecting it. I had it confirmed this morning. I thought you might have heard me screaming with joy when the doctor told me the news."

Virginia sat back and looked at Mark. He shrugged and shook his head.

She smiled smugly and thought, "This is great, Mamma. I still got them both. Slick Virginia strikes again. There's more than one way to skin a cat. That's your saying."

"Meow!" Virginia heard the distinct cry, and she snapped alert.

She whirled and viewed the entire yard, but she saw no cat. She went to John who stood at the grill, turning the steaks, and avoided Mark's inquisitive gaze.

"What can I do for you, honey?" John asked and greeted her with a kiss.

“Nothing, my darling man. I just stopped by to say I love you. I’m happy I found you at a good time in my life.”

#

About the Author

J Bennington: Fresh out of High School, I spent 21 years in the Air Force, serving in Viet Nam, Thailand, United States, and Germany. After retiring from the Air Force, I drove a limousine under contract for Conrail, moving train crews from stations to trains, and anywhere needed. I wrote 5 books, longhand, while waiting in rail stations, State Prison fields at 2 A M, and any forlorn rail crossing, right out of Stephen King novels with all the demons and terror. Following that exciting but tiring job, I tackled a few independent businesses that failed. Worked two years in a restaurant as the salad bar manager. Worked 1 year as Electric Meter Reader for the City of Dover, DE. Then a friend arranged a part-time clerical position in the State Probation Office. From there, I applied for full-time jobs and worked 20 years for the Department of Transportation, selling Hauling Permits to truckers or trucking companies, billing companies for Outdoor Advertising, and later I paid the bills to State Contractors. I retired in February 2014 and now I'm doing what I love, writing and working to publish the books collecting electronic dust over the years.

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